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**“You Can Freak Out or Deal with It”: Military Wives’ Perspectives on  
Communication and Family Resilience, Coping, and Support During  
Deployment**

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Communication and Family Resilience, Coping, and Support During  
Deployment**

by

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# **“You Can Freak Out or Deal with It”: Military Wives’ Perspectives on Communication and Family Resilience, Coping, and Support During Deployment**

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This study investigates the process of resilience from the perspective of military wives during deployment. The study had two main goals: 1) to further understand the deployment experience, as it is lived personally and within the family, and 2) to develop a theory-based resilience model, guided by family stress and resilience theory, highlighting the role of communication within the family resilience process. According to the FAAR Model (Patterson, 1988; 2002), resilience involves three components: meanings, demands, and capabilities. Based on the goals of the study and the three main components of resilience, five broad research questions guided the study: How do military spouses perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their experience with spousal deployment? How do spouses cope with the spousal deployment experience? How do spouses perceive the family deployment and coping experience? What supportive

resources and responses are most helpful for military spouses during spousal deployment, and why? And what supportive resources and responses are most unhelpful for military spouses during spousal deployment, and why? The data are also viewed through a lens of ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999; 2004; 2006; 2007), as deployment is a stressful situation that incorporates uncertainty, loss, and a presence-absence paradox for spouses and families. To investigate these questions and develop these theories, in-depth interviews were conducted with 26 military wives who were currently experiencing deployment. The results illustrate various aspects of women's perceptions of their deployment experiences, including how they make sense of these experiences. Women did not only discuss their own personal experiences; they also reported experiences at relational and family levels. Paralleling these tri-level perceptions of the experience, women's approaches to coping also occurred at individual, relational, and family levels. Different coping strategies within each level are outlined and discussed. Finally, women's perceptions and evaluations of the responses they receive from others, both supportive and unsupportive, are reported and discussed. Based on the results, a transactional model of family resilience, highlighting the central role of communication, is proposed. Implications for theory (e.g., stress and resilience theories, ambiguous loss theory) and practice are discussed. Future directions for research are explored.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background

Deployment is a family crisis significant within our own and many other societies today. Understanding the impact military deployment has on family relationships and family communication is currently of particular relevance in the United States because as of early 2009, approximately 142,000 US troops were currently deployed in Iraq (Carter, 2009), and approximately 34,000 US troops were currently deployed in Afghanistan (NBC News, February 7, 2009). These numbers are now decreasing in Iraq and increasing in Afghanistan. Even following the withdrawal of combat forces, however, future projections place 50,000 US soldiers in Iraq in August 2010 (Carter, 2009), and President Obama approved the deployment of 17,000 more US troops to Afghanistan in the late spring of 2009 (NBC News, February 7, 2009).

Previous and continued deployments have left and will continue to leave service members and their families greatly affected by the war. Yet for others deployment has not hit home, as the US has not reached a point of national mobilization. For these people, the impact of deployment on military families may not be clear. They may not know how to react to families' stressful circumstances; thus creating secondary challenges for military families, as they have to manage their network interactions. As such, researchers are presented with an opportunity to learn more about the experience of stress, coping, and communication for individuals within their families as well as within their communities.

It is clear that military men and women face multiple challenges during deployment, but less obvious are the struggles people left at home experience when their family members are sent away. Military deployment has considerable effects on the family system (Hillenbrand, 1976; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007; Jensen, Martin, & Watanabe, 1996), and during wartime is considered an emotionally traumatic event because it is tied to prolonged family separation and laden with uncertainty, fear, and disorganization (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). The separation of family members produces changes and challenges for individuals within the family, and these challenges can cause psychological problems. Yet, family members often manage to effectively cope with deployment and the losses and struggles incorporated within it. According to Henry & Robichaux (1999):

Many Army families savor the positives, survive the hardships, and blossom into resilient families within an often demanding environment. Some families, especially young families, are bombarded by stressors that overwhelm already meager personal resources (p. 217).

What contributes to families' abilities to survive hardships? The process of resilience can occur individually, but when faced with a mutually stressful event such as deployment, family members' experiences and reactions likely influence and are affected by each other. As such, I will first explore the family stressor: how do family members experience and make sense out of deployment? More specifically, how do they feel about the event—what individual changes, challenges, or privileges do they face? But also how do they perceive their family deployment experiences? Second, I will investigate the

process of resilience within families: how do family members cope with deployment personally and collaboratively? More specifically, what coping strategies and resources assist or impede the resilience process for family members, and why? And what role does communication play in this process?

The current research offers an in-depth exploration of stress experiences and the resilience process, as they occur for individuals and within the context of family relationships. When people have the ability to cope, they may be better able to avoid the disequilibrium, disorganization, and disruptiveness associated with crisis and stress (Patterson, 2002). Therefore, a better understanding of coping in the context of deployment helps us further uncover the specific processes that allow military family members, individually and interactively, to survive challenges and exercise resilience rather than become plagued with conflict and suffering.

Context: Deployment

#### *Deployment Defined*

Military deployment is a unique crisis event that occurs when men and women are given assignments across the US or abroad, requiring absence from home and family. Although many think of military service members as either deployed or not deployed, deployment actually occurs in stages (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001; Rabb, Baumer, & Wieseler, 1993). Pincus and colleagues (2001) discuss five stages of deployment: pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, redeployment, and post-deployment. Pre-deployment includes the time between the warning order of deployment and the actual deployment from the home base. Deployment involves the initial period of

time that service members are stationed away from home. The sustainment phase is the main portion of time spent away, and the re-deployment phase is the final month before the service member is scheduled to return to home base. Finally, post-deployment is the initial period upon return to the home station (Pincus et al., 2001). Rabb and colleagues (1993) discuss only three stages: pre-deployment, deployment, and reunification/sustainment. Although the former stage model is more comprehensive, both focus on the time prior to deployment, during deployment, and upon return of the service member. These stages help us understand the complexity of deployment and underscore how deployment, and the challenges and needs associated with it, occurs over time within families. More research is necessary to fully understand the challenges families face during each of the stages (Pincus et al., 2001). This study's focus is on the period of time during deployment, as it is occurring for families.

### *Effects of Military Deployment*

Military deployment during wartime is considered a catastrophic family stressor because it involves danger and can lead to feelings of helplessness, loss, disruption, and destruction (McCubbin & Figley, 1983; Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). Military personnel and their families often feel the situation is out of their control (Huebner et al., 2007; Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994), which can create high levels of fear and uncertainty (Huebner et al., 2007). Thus, wartime deployment creates an opportunity for negative psychological symptoms to emerge (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). These symptoms can occur during all phases of the deployment, so each stage of the deployment, with all its unique challenges, must be dealt with in the family. Failing to

address the challenges can lead to increased conflict (Pincus et al., 2001) and family stress (Pittman, Kerpelman, & McFadyen, 2004).

The effects of military deployment are known to occur during deployment as well as upon reunion (Bowen, 1989; Pittman et al., 2004). The effect of parental military deployment on children has been well documented in previous family research because deployment is thought to most acutely affect youth (Hardin, Hayes, Cheever, & Addy, 2003; Hillenbrand, 1976; Huebner et al., 2007; Jensen et al., 1996). However, the specifics of this claim are contradictory. Some researchers have found that boys and younger children are most strongly affected (Jensen et al., 1996), whereas others have found that girls and African-Americans are most acutely affected (Hardin et al., 2003).

Overall, a variety of psychological and behavioral symptoms have been attached to the experience of youth faced with parental deployment. Increased depression (Hillenbrand, 1976; Huebner et al., 2007; Jensen et al., 1996), anxiety, ambiguity (Huebner et al., 2007), uncertainty (Allen & Staley, 2007; Huebner et al., 2007), stress (Allen & Staley, 2007), and distress (Hardin et al., 2003) in youth are among the symptoms that may result from parental deployment. Children of military parents are also more likely to perceive the world as unsafe and recognize the potential for losing their parents to death (Beard, Mathewson, Saari, & Campagna, 2008). In addition to these psychological symptoms, parental deployment can also have behavioral effects on children, including increased aggressiveness, irritability, impulsiveness (Hillenbrand, 1976), and relationship conflict (Huebner et al., 2007). Although these outcomes highlight the negative, it should be noted that children also often feel a sense of pride or

protection having a military parent (Beard et al., 2008; Huebner et al., 2007). These dichotomous feelings likely intensify the uncertainty associated with parental deployment and complicate how parents support their children and help them cope with the deployment, which may be necessary in the context of a mutually stressful event and part of the parental/familial coping process.

The psychological and behavioral effects of parental deployment on children can be thought of as a family problem rather than an individual problem (Jensen et al., 1996) because children's and parents' experiences are intertwined. In other words, the difficulties of children and adolescents and their caretakers are mutually influential. Children's responses to stressful events tend to reflect mother's reactions (Gelfand & Teti, 1990; Riggs, 1990). For example, children with elevated negative symptoms tend to have at-home parents who also show increased negative symptoms and high levels of family stress (Jensen et al., 1996), and the mental health of the at-home parent influences the adjustment and psychological effects seen in children (Huebner et al., 2007; Jensen et al., 1996). As such, the more emotionally nurtured the caretaker, the less stressed the children will be (Bryce, Walker, Ghorayeb, & Kanj, 1989; Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). Therefore, understanding the challenges of military spouses during deployment, as well as effective coping strategies and helpful support, is important to the well-being of spouses and their children.

Military deployment creates high levels of strain for spouses who remain at home (Beard et al., 2008; Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). Military spouses become single parents during deployment, leaving them with total responsibility of the household and

children, changing family dynamics, and financial strain (Beard et al., 2008).

Compounded by the absence of relationship partners and the worry of spousal injury or death (Beard et al., 2008), the challenges military spouses face are sizeable and the impact they can have is significant. Parents, like their children, report higher levels of depression following spousal deployment (Jensen et al., 1996). Feelings of abandonment, uncontrollability, and conscious or unconscious rage are also symptomatic of the loss associated with spousal deployment (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). Therefore, spousal/parental behavioral changes that can negatively impact children and the family are likely (Huebner et al., 2007). For example, Gibbs and colleagues (2007) found that child maltreatment in families increased significantly during combat deployment. As long as war persists, these deployment challenges will not disappear. However, if we can discover and aid in the adoption positive coping capabilities, the outcomes of spousal and parental deployment may become less grim.

In addition to challenges spouses and children at home during deployment face, there are also relationship challenges for military couples. According to Jacobs and Hicks (1987), separation and the inability to communicate tend to diminish intimacy in couples even though there may be benefits of deployment separation for at-home spouses (e.g., independence, time with friends) that promote higher relationship satisfaction upon reunion. Mixed conclusions about divorce rates in the military corroborate this idea of deployment as a double-edged sword for military couples. Current statistics show that in 2004 3,325 Army officers' marriages and 7,152 enlisted personnel's marriages ended in divorce. This is a 78% and 28% increase, respectively, from 2003, the year of the Iraq

invasion (Zoroya, 2005). It is surmised that divorce rates have increased because of increased military deployments, but this conclusion is not well understood. A study conducted by Rand's National Defense Research Institute states that marital dissolution has indeed increased since the onset of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but argues this could be a return to the baseline divorce rates, as there was a sharp decrease in 2000. The report concludes there is no evidence for a direct causal relationship between the experience of deployment and marital dissolution. Indeed, with the exception of active Air Force, their study finds that the effects of deployment on dissolution are insignificant or even beneficial for most military couples (Karney & Crown, 2007). Considering these mixed interpretations of the effects of deployment on marital relationships, and knowing that dissolution is not the only indicator of relational hardship, the challenges and benefits deployment creates for military relationships need further investigation. With improved understanding of the relational experience during deployment we can also better understand whether or not and how partners collectively cope with it.

#### *Resources for Military Families*

It might be assumed that military families receive high levels of support from each other because deployment is a shared experience across families and within the base community. And this may hold true. Military websites and bases offer a variety of resources for families, including information and advice on deployment, counseling, education, childcare, finances, etc. (see [militaryonesource.com](http://militaryonesource.com) and [nmfa.org](http://nmfa.org) for examples). Military blogs and virtual support groups (e.g., [spousebuzz.com](http://spousebuzz.com), [meetup.com](http://meetup.com), yahoo groups) offer a place for military spouses to record and discuss their experiences

and connect with each other. Family Readiness Groups (FRGs) are also available for military spouses during deployment. Yet, many spouses, especially enlisted spouses, do not find these groups to be helpful or well organized (Orthner, 2002). So although deployment is a shared event within and across families, and there are resources created with the purpose of assisting military families, majority of military families still have difficulties coping with deployment (Evers, Clay, & Jumper, 2004). As such, without empirical investigation, it cannot be assumed that military family members are utilizing and/or benefiting from resources and feeling a deeper sense of support.

#### *Summary*

Addressing the challenges, feelings, and coping resources of at-home family members during deployment is helpful in understanding and offering interventions and support for the families. It may also be helpful for military service members as they return home to their families and continue in their military positions. Family adjustment can have an impact on the military's retention of soldiers and soldier effectiveness (Nice, 1981; Pincus et al., 2001). Deployment period functioning within the family is also likely related to positive family outcomes post-deployment (Pittman et al., 2004). Thus, working with families early on in the deployment process could positively influence the health of military families, which may in turn improve the health of military personnel (through improved effectiveness) and the military itself (through retention of employees).

## Potential Background Theory: Ambiguous Loss Theory

### *Ambiguous Loss Defined*

According to Huebner and colleagues (2007), “The only certainty about deployment during war is uncertainty from beginning to end” (p. 113). The overarching uncertainty, fear, and uncontrollability (Huebner et al., 2007; Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994) associated with deployment, along with the need it creates for the reorganization of family structure, makes ambiguous loss theory (see Boss, 1999; 2004; 2006; 2007) a valuable framework for understanding the experiences military families face during deployment.

Ambiguous loss and boundary ambiguity are the primary constructs associated with ambiguous loss theory. Ambiguous loss is a loss that remains unclear (Boss, 2007) and involves a paradox of both absence and presence of the lost person (Boss, 2006). There may be physical absence with psychological presence or psychological absence with physical presence involved in ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999; 2004; 2006). Faced with such traumatizing events as kidnapping, divorce, mental illness, or military deployment, families are left to construct their own truths about the location or status of the absent person (Boss, 1999; 2007). Thus, the premise of ambiguous loss theory is, “uncertainty or a lack of information about the whereabouts or status of a loved one as absent or present, as dead or alive, is traumatizing for most individuals, couples, and families” (Boss, 2007, p. 105).

Although the paradox of presence and absence associated with ambiguous loss can enhance the resiliency of families, as they are forced to think with a both/and

perspective, it can also cause problems (Boss, 1999; 2004; 2006; 2007). Families experiencing ambiguous loss may not have access to the resources and rituals that often follow an unambiguous loss, such as the death of a loved one (Boss, 2007). This can stem from uncertainty regarding the validity of the loss or the status of the lost person. For example, Golish and Powell (2003) examined family members' experience with the ambiguous loss of premature birth, which involves the loss of full-term pregnancy and certainty regarding the baby's health. Because the babies were still alive, family members were not sure how they should feel and communicate about the loss.

Boundary ambiguity, or "not knowing who is in or out of your family or relationship," also complicates ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006, p. 12). This ambiguity regarding the structure of the family stems from the absence-presence paradox and can propel a confusing reorganization of roles, responsibilities, and routines (Boss, 2006). Boundary ambiguity is linked to feelings of identity because it involves learning to know "who one is and what roles he or she will play in relation to others in a context of family and community" (Boss, 2006, p. 116). It also involves understanding and mastering roles and skills that may be new to members of the family (Boss, 2006). All of these processes involve demands that complicate adaptation to ambiguous loss. Feelings of control and mastery over life are considered primary resources for coping (Thoits, 1995). When faced with ambiguous loss, these resources may be lacking.

### *Ambiguous Loss and Deployment*

So how does ambiguous loss theory inform our understanding of military deployment? Deployment involves ambiguous loss and boundary ambiguity, which are

the elements involved in ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006). First, because the status of the deployed person is often unknown, deployment is plagued with uncertainty from beginning to end (Huebner et al., 2007). The ambiguity surrounding military deployment could range from temporal questions (when will s/he return?) to mortality questions (will s/he come back dead or alive?). If the deployment is temporary, there is uncertainty regarding *how* the deployed person will return. Soldiers may come home alive or dead, incapacitated or healthy, and this outcome is uncertain (Huebner et al., 2007). All of these questions and uncertainties can bring stress to the family. In ambiguous loss, the context is also generally out of the control of those experiencing the loss, leaving them uncertain and unable to resolve the situation (Boss, 1999; 2004). Deployment is typically out of the control of the military family, and this feeling of uncontrollability can negatively affect members of the family during deployment (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994).

Ambiguous loss also involves both the presence and absence of the lost person (Boss, 1999; 2004; 2006). During military deployment, families will experience the physical absence of the service member, but a continued psychological presence may exist. Technology assists in keeping service members more psychologically present in their families, which likely aids in the reduction of uncontrollability (Pincus et al., 2001) and uncertainty (Huebner et al., 2007). Yet, the physical absence is still felt in families and psychological presence likely varies across families, impacting their experiences with deployment. Upon return, families will experience the physical presence of the service member, but psychological absence may emerge. Soldiers often feel estranged from themselves and their families upon returning home (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994;

Solomon, 1988). Therefore, military families may experience both sides of the presence/absence paradox during the trajectory of deployment.

Second, boundary ambiguity, or confusion surrounding who is in or out of the family and reorganization of the family structure (Boss, 2006), is present in the context of deployment. As military members are deployed, families at home experience a change in their routines and responsibilities (Huebner et al., 2007). For example, distribution of household chores, family activities, and family relationships may change during deployment (Huebner & Mancini, 2005). This restructuring of roles within the family can also occur as military members return home and the family is expected to reorganize itself back to the way it was before (Huebner et al., 2007). These changes can be challenging because the family bases its identity on individual roles within the family, and with ever-changing roles and responsibilities come changes in identity, which may be difficult to accept. Developing skills, discussing role changes (Huebner & Mancini, 2005), making new roles explicit, mastering new roles, and planning for future changes (Huebner et al., 2007), may help families readjust to the boundary ambiguity they experience during deployment. This study investigates how family members cope with the boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss associated with deployment. Given the uncontrollable nature of deployment, families may not be able to aptly prepare for the future or discuss changes, so there are likely other strategies better equipped to help families cope.

One could question whether ambiguous loss theory is an appropriate framework for understanding families with military members who come home alive. Many military

members are sent to non-combat zones, and others do not experience injury or death during their tours. Ambiguous loss theory has been illustrated as a relevant framework for understanding family stress caused by military deployment (Huebner et al., 2007), high-risk jobs like firefighting (Regehr, Dimitropoulos, Bright, George, & Henderson, 2005), Alzheimer's disease (Boss, 1993; Perry, 2002), autism, adoption, HIV/AIDS, infertility, and immigration (Boss, 2006), where death is not the source of loss. According to Huebner et al. (2007), because the family misses key events and experiences high levels of stress, military deployment can be considered ambiguous loss even when soldiers return home alive and well. For example, in a study reported to the Military Family Research Institute and Department of Defense Quality of Life Office, one adolescent participant noted the worst thing about having a parent deployed:

You don't get everything you want when they are gone. When your dad's not home you don't get to go fishing, go paintballing, go skiing, waterskiing, water tubing, playing sharks and stuff (Huebner & Mancini, 2005, p. 19).

Beyond the loss of key events and time together, upon reunification there may still be uncertainty about if the military member will be re-deployed, if he/she will be different, or if he/she will still love his/her family in the same way. Another participant in Huebner and Mancini's (2005) report stated, "...when they come home is that awkward bonding phase all over again, like you are starting from scratch" (p. 19). Thus the pre-established bond can be altered and must be renegotiated when the military member returns home.

Regarding whether or not deployment comprises loss when the military member returns home, it is also important to consider that wellness upon return can vary, and the

appearance of wellness can be deceiving. In the current war, many of the service members deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan are exposed to life-changing stressors that make reintegration difficult (Johnson et al., 2007). Service members experience their own losses and are forced to cope with their own experiences during deployment, which can be traumatic. Additionally, returning home alive may mean returning home with injuries and war-related mental and physical health issues. For example, military members may come home with wounds, amputations, disfigurements, brain injuries, substance abuse disorders, or mental health disorders. Negative symptoms (e.g., sleep disturbances, irritability, marital and family stress) may surface several months post-deployment and can occur even when wartime dangers and time away from home are minimal (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994). The loss of an able-bodied or healthy parent or spouse then becomes another issue for families to face. Injuries may require the family to travel to distant hospitals or caregiving facilities, which leads to the loss of familiar friends, activities, and schools (Cozza, Chun, & Polo, 2005). This moving and traveling is also characteristic of military life when soldiers come home healthy, as military personnel are often ordered to PCS (permanent change of station). In sum, the ambiguous loss associated with military deployment is significant both during the deployment itself and upon the return of the service member.

#### *Ambiguous Loss and Resilience*

Despite the universality of loss in family life, and the assertion that unresolved losses lie at the root of many family problems, few family scholars have studied it (Boss, 2007). The connection between ambiguous loss and family stress and coping is an

especially new development for family communication researchers. As such, many questions remain unanswered in terms of the ambiguous loss experience, the feelings resulting from it, and the behavioral and communicative strategies employed to manage it. Boss (2006) developed a resilience-centered framework for helping families experiencing ambiguous loss. She purports that resilience is promoted through helping individuals and families find meaning, alleviate the need for mastery, reconstruct identity, normalize ambivalence, revise attachments, and discover hope (Boss, 2006). These theoretically based suggestions are helpful in considering the goals involved in healthfully adjusting to ambiguous loss. However, if and *how* individuals and families meet these goals, through their communication and behavior, is not well understood. More specifically, what supports or encumbers individuals and families as they attempt to find meaning, alleviate the need for mastery, reconstruct identity, normalize ambivalence, revise attachments, and discover hope?

Ambiguity and loss together can create a barrier to coping and grieving (Boss, 2006), which may stem from the inability to resolve the circumstances of the event (Huebner et al., 2007). Although military families are not in a position where they can control whether or not their family member will be deployed, this should not be taken to mean they are unable to cope with the multitude of stressful circumstances accompanying deployment. Some researchers (e.g., Huebner et al., 2007) mention possible interventions based on outcomes of ambiguous loss, such as making new roles explicit and planning for the future, but coping and resilience in the context of ambiguous loss and deployment is in need of empirical investigation. The literature on family stress and resilience

provides a useful starting point for such an investigation and a broader perspective through which to understand the deployment experience, coping, and the role communication plays in families faced with stressful events.

According to stress theories (e.g., ABCX Model, Hill, 1949; Double ABCX Model, McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; FAAR Model, Patterson, 1988), the resilience process involves a balancing of demands and capabilities, including coping strategies and resources. Understanding helpful and unhelpful communication strategies associated with coping is important to family stress and loss research because it helps create a link between the experience of the stressful event (e.g., challenges, changes) and its potential negative effects. Yet, thus far, ambiguous loss theorists have primarily focused on challenges and outcomes of loss events, leaving a void in the literature regarding the process of coping and resilience. Ambiguous loss is one potential lens through which to view deployment. Yet when considering deployment as a family stress event, one should not be bound to these explanations of challenges and prescriptions for resilience. Individuals experiencing deployment encounter various challenges and uncertainties; but they are also equipped with support networks often lacking during ambiguous loss, which makes deployment a unique event. As such, it is imperative to investigate how family members interpret the deployment experience, resolve (or do not resolve) challenges, and meet (or do not meet) needs, including and extending beyond those outlined in ambiguous loss theory. Again, although ambiguous loss is highly relevant to deployment, and likely influences the way people cope with deployment, it is not the only contributor to the challenges and stress involved in it.

In the following sections, I will review family stress and resilience theory. Family stress and resilience theory, though not specific to ambiguous loss or deployment, is a useful guide for understanding the process of coping with a stressful life event. First, I will define and discuss resilience as an outcome and a process. Then, I will examine meaning making as it relates to the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response Model (FAAR), family stress, and loss. Meaning making can be thought of in two ways: 1) the way families make sense out of their experience with deployment and coping and 2) a way for families to cope with deployment. In other words, exploring meaning is a way to understand both an outcome (the meaning made) and a process (meaning making). Next, I will review stress demands and capabilities, including coping strategies and resources. Within the discussion of coping strategies and resources special attention will be paid to uncertainty management and support because my focus is on communicatively managing stress, individually and with others, and uncertainty is one prominent feature of ambiguous loss and deployment that likely requires management. The goal of this review is to provide a thorough overview of the family stress, coping, and resilience literature to establish a foundation for studying these issues in the context of deployment and work toward a theory-based resilience model highlighting communication and its functions during deployment. Developing a communication-based model will benefit practitioners, support providers, and the family members experiencing the stress, challenges, and needs associated with deployment.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Theoretical Framework: Family Stress and Resilience Theory

#### *Family Stress and Resilience*

According to family stress theory, specifically the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) Model (Patterson, 1988), adjustment and adaptation to stress involve restoring a balance between demands and capabilities. In other words, families use their capabilities (coping behaviors and resources) to meet the challenges faced in a stressful situation. When imbalance occurs, and demands exceed capabilities (maladaptation), families enter the crisis experience, or “a period of significant disequilibrium, disorganization, and disruptiveness in the family” (Patterson, 2002, p. 237). Bonadaptation occurs when capabilities actually exceed demands (Patterson, 1988). When families can maintain a balance, and their demands do not exceed their coping capabilities, they are said to be adapted (Patterson, 1988; 2002), readjusted (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), or resilient (Patterson, 2002).

Resilience can be further defined in different ways. Patterson (2002), and the FAAR Model, conceptualizes resilience as the balancing of family demands and family capabilities. Others define resilience as the ability to overcome stress or adversity (Rutter, 1999), successfully adapt to change (Cicchetti & Cohen, 1995), recover from a stressful event (Garmezy, 1991), and maintain resistance to psychosocial risk experiences (Rutter, 1999). Olsson and colleagues (2003) note that resilience can be seen as both an outcome and a process. Resilience as an outcome is characterized as functional behavior despite risk or stress experiences. The emphasis here is on functionality, including adaptive

mental health and social competence. Resilience as a process is characterized as adaptation to stress involving the interaction between risk and protective factors (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003) and between external circumstances and attributes (Mederer, 1999) at both individual and social levels. The focus is on the mechanisms or processes that help modify risk and aid in adaptation (Olsson et al., 2003).

The current study examines resilience as a process. In other words, the focus is on the processes involved in adapting to the experiences surrounding a stressful life event—deployment—individually and within the family system. Following the components of the FAAR Model (Patterson, 1988), which derives from the ABCX Model (Hill, 1949; 1958) and Double ABCX Model (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), the next section outlines three areas important to the resilience process: meaning, demands, and capabilities. The FAAR Model conceptualizes resilience as an active process, underscoring the importance of achieving balance between demands and capabilities as they interact with family meanings (Patterson, 1988; Patterson, 2002). It is necessary to first define and explain meanings, as they relate to stressful life events, because they involve subjective interpretations of not only the stressful event but also its demands and one's individual and family capabilities for dealing with it.

### *Family Stress and Meaning Making*

According to resilience frameworks, the personal meaning one makes out of his or her situation is vital to recovery (Smith, 1999). In families faced with stressful events, finding shared meaning is said to help reduce uncertainty (Gilbert, 1996), facilitate communication, provide structure and meaning in interactions, improve problem solving,

and facilitate coping behavior (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Patterson & Garwick, 1994). The original ABCX Model (Hill, 1949; 1958) and Double ABCX Model (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983) first discussed meanings in terms of the family's definition of the stressful event. Since then, meaning has been extended to situational meanings and global meanings. First, situational meanings involve definitions of the stressful event, especially in terms of demands and capabilities (Patterson, 1988). The initial appraisal of the event is considered a primary appraisal, whereas the evaluation of the available resources for coping with it is considered a secondary appraisal (Lazarus, 1966). Interpretations of the situation and demands can be based on control (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Patterson, 1988; Patterson, 2002), valence, impact (Patterson, 1988; Patterson, 2002), cause, effect (Patterson, 2002), ownership, responsibility (Afifi, Hutchinson, & Krouse, 2006), threat, harm, awareness (Linley & Joseph, 2004), and ambiguity (Boss, 1977; Patterson, 1988). These interpretations of the event will influence the way people cope.

Second, global meanings refer to how family members view their internal family relationships and their external relationships with the community (Patterson, 1988). These meanings can involve culture and religion, and they often shape family functioning (Patterson, 2002). Global meanings also encompass what Patterson (2002) later distinguishes as meanings regarding the family's identity. Together, global and identity meanings illustrate how the family "develops an implicit and shared set of assumptions and meanings about themselves in relation to each other, and about their family in relation to the community and systems beyond their boundaries" (Patterson, 1988, p.

223). This includes values, norms, routines, and rituals (Patterson, 2002). These patterns develop into a family schema (Patterson, 1988) or paradigm (Reiss, 1981; Reiss & Oliveri, 1980) that influences the family's orientation toward stress. Families who develop a high tolerance for ambiguity or high flexibility, for example, are likely to cope with stress differently than those who require more certainty and are more rigid. During times of stress, global meanings (both identity and worldview) can be disrupted and need reconstruction.

The construction of meaning is a process that can occur collaboratively and is seen as an element of coping (Afifi et al., 2006; Patterson, 1988). "Meaning making plays a central role in the process of adjusting to loss and trauma because it serves to maintain two aspects of our sense of self that often are most threatened by loss and trauma: our sense of self-worth and our most fundamental beliefs or assumptions about how the world works" (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001, p. 727). In addition to maintaining self-worth and pre-established worldviews (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998), meaning making involves changing the appraisals of the traumatic experience in order to reduce the discrepancy between this situational meaning and pre-established worldviews (Park & Blumberg, 2002). It also involves seeking perceived benefits including, but not limited to, growth in character, gain in perspective, and a strengthening of relationships (Lehman et al., 1993; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). Although studies vary in their claims about how meaning influences resilience, one review concludes that positive reinterpretation and acceptance of events, especially those considered highly traumatic, can lead to reports of growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

So the way people interpret their stressful events can help them find a place within a world re-centered based on the stressful event they endured, and it can even help them find benefits within their stress or loss.

Descriptions of meaning making are based on types of meaning made (e.g., situational, global), the process of meaning making (e.g., changing appraisals, reinterpretation), and the functions the process serves (e.g., developing an identity, re-establishing worldviews, finding benefits). The family is a system of members whose reactions are mutually influencing each other, allowing them to create, organize, or invest in their stories (Rosenblatt, 1993). So how do family members make meaning in a way that aids or disrupts the process of family resilience during deployment? How individuals enact meaning making within the context of the family, especially as a coping strategy and through communication, is still less clear. It is understood that meaning is made in interactions with others (Armour, 2003), and this joint meaning making is a process associated with coping (Afifi et al., 2006). Yet the ways in which this is done is in need further empirical investigation. As Neimeyer (2000) advocates, we need a more “refined and clinically rich conception of the process of meaning reconstruction, one that accredits its complexity, its social character, and the conditions that facilitate or impede it” (p. 555).

To understand the construction of meaning and the meaning made during deployment, I collected narratives from military wives regarding their perceptions of the deployment experience. This investigation helps expand our understanding of meaning and meaning making while also helping to develop further knowledge about the

connection between meaning and the resilience process. In hearing women's stories, I experienced the process of meaning making firsthand, but telling the story also offered the opportunity for individuals to discuss the meaning they had created and were creating, individually and within their families, about deployment, its demands, and their coping processes. In other words, I gained access into the reality of their stress experience, as they created it for themselves (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997).

### *Family Stress and Demands*

Life events become stressful when there is a discrepancy between the objective and subjective demands posed and the coping capabilities available to deal with those demands (Farrington, 1986; Patterson, 1988; 2002). Objective demands involve the reality of the situation, independent of perceptions of the event, and subjective demands involve the situation as it is defined according to the perception of the individual or social system experiencing it (Farrington, 1986).

Demands (Farrington, 1986), also termed risk factors (Patterson, 2002) or individual and family demands (Patterson, 1988; 2002), involve a threat to existing homeostatic functioning (Patterson, 1988). These demands can include stressors (Patterson, 1988) and strains (Patterson, 1988; 2002). Stressors, or life events that produce change, typically have a discrete onset (the time of the event) and may be normative or non-normative, ongoing or sudden (Patterson, 1988; 2002). Strain, though of less focus in the stress literature, is "a condition of felt tension associated with the need or desire to change something" (Patterson, 1988, p. 210). Strains occur in three circumstances: a) when there is unresolved tension from stressors, b) when role

performances do not meet expectations, or c) when outcomes of managing demands and capabilities are maladaptive (Patterson, 1988). To show the distinction between stressors and strain, Patterson (1988) states, “Stressors happen and produce change. In contrast, strains are already there, and the change that is demanded is to get rid of them” (p. 211). In the context of deployment, spousal departure can be considered a stressor. Resulting from the departure, the at-home parent may need to conduct all household and parental roles alone leaving no time for individuality and privacy. Thus, if interpreted as a strain, then a desire for change occurs.

Stress theory tends to focus on stressors, or the stressful event, its circumstances, and the perceptions surrounding it. Strain is a bi-product of stressors, stemming from life changes and meaning construction, and is also a significant aspect worthy of exploration, especially in ambiguous loss situations where the stressor and its appraisals may be more fluid and unclear. For example, role strain occurs when families require restructuring and individual roles and responsibilities change (Boss, 2006). As such, the process of resilience depends not only upon the stressor itself (deployment), but also upon the tensions, role changes, expectations, and outcomes it inspires. Individual strains may vary even within the same event, with seemingly similar challenges. As such, the personal perspective of the entire experience, as it affects daily life, identity, and feelings, is relevant when examining how family members successfully navigate deployment.

In sum, demands can lead to vulnerability to stress, and the accumulation or pile up of demands leads to the most problematic outcomes (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Patterson, 1988). Incurring one or more major negative life events in less than one year is

thought to predict increases in distress and psychiatric disorder (Cohen & Williamson, 1991; Coyne & Downey, 1991; Thoits, 1983). These negative consequences are based on the demands of the stressful event, but also the loss of a foundation for coping with the event (Ben-Sira, 1983; Farrington, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1993). However, if individuals and families are adaptive, for example having individual and social response capabilities, they may not be as vulnerable to stress (Ben-Sira, 1983; Farrington, 1986; Patterson, 1988; 2002). Stress is not the mere presence of demands, but instead the subjective awareness of demands and a perceived imbalance between demands and capabilities (Patterson, 1988).

#### *Family Stress and Capabilities*

Stressful events elicit behavioral and emotional reactions that motivate coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). As aforementioned, objective and subjective demands require readjustment (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), or the restoration of emotional homeostasis disturbed by the subjectively appraised stressful change (Ben-Sira, 1983). This readjustment calls for response capabilities, including coping behaviors and resources (Ben-Sira, 1983; Farrington, 1986; Patterson, 1988; 2002). In general, capabilities, also labeled protective factors, are thought to reduce the possibility for dysfunction and disorder in the presence of stressful life events (Gore & Eckenrode, 1994). Consequently, much research has developed regarding how people cope with negative life events. People tend to cope well if they have a repertoire of strategies and resources, and when their own behaviors and support from others help them avoid maladaptive responses to stressful events (Rutter, 1999).

### *Coping Strategies*

Coping behaviors or strategies are typically thought of in terms of what the individual or family *does*. Coping strategies involve problem- and emotion-focused attempts to manage stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Thoits, 1995). These processes can be individual or communal and active or passive (Afifi et al., 2006). According to the FAAR Model, the function of coping strategies or behaviors is to restore the balance between demands and capabilities (Patterson, 1988). These coping behaviors can involve several different actions: a) taking direct action to reduce demands, b) taking direct action to acquire protective resources (such as social support), c) maintaining existing resources to help meet demands, d) managing ongoing tension resulting from demands, and e) reappraising the situation (Patterson, 1988). Reappraising the situation ties clearly to the reinterpretation of events, discussed in terms of meaning making and considered beneficial to the process of resilience. A less specific typology includes direct coping, general coping, and suppression (Parkes, 1984).

Individuals are a part of a larger system within the family (Gilbert, 1996); as such, coping strategies occur at individual and social levels. Personal coping strategies outlined in previous research include disbelief/acceptance, emotional control, expression/exposure, rationalization, faith, involvement with others, indulgence in substances (Shuchter & Zisook, 1993), distraction, avoidance (Hampel & Petermann, 2006; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993), minimization, situation control, positive self-instructions, rumination, aggression, and searching for meaning (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Research with adolescents in military families found that distractions, exercise, lashing

out, confiding in friends, self-harm, and isolation served as ways to help them feel “less stressed” (Huebner & Mancini, 2005, p. 24). Although some of these strategies may be more relevant to adolescents (e.g., self-harm, lashing out), many are also likely helpful for military spouses. This research also highlighted how constructive coping strategies can be interpreted as both beneficial and detrimental when dealing with stress. For example, confiding in friends was discussed as a coping strategy but also difficult because adolescents felt their friends would not understand or should not be bothered (Huebner & Mancini, 2005). Understanding the subjective experience of different behaviors is important to understanding their role in the resilience process.

Bodenmann, Pihet, and Kayser (2006) discuss dyadic coping as a “process on the dyadic level in which the coping reactions of one partner take into account the stress signals of the other partner” (p. 486). Two forms of dyadic coping include active engagement and protective buffering (Coyne & Smith, 1991). These strategies involve engaging the stressed partner in discussion to initiate problem solving (active engagement) or attempting to relieve the partner emotionally (protective buffering). According to a systemic-transactional perspective, dyadic coping can be problem- and emotion-focused as well as positive and negative (Bodenmann, 2005). Positive dyadic coping includes supportive dyadic coping (e.g., offering help, giving advice), common dyadic coping (e.g., joint problem solving, sharing of feelings), and delegated dyadic coping (e.g., division of tasks based on asking for help). Negative dyadic coping can be hostile (e.g., mocking, disparaging, distancing), ambivalent (e.g., unwilling support,

judging need for support as unnecessary), and superficial (e.g., lack of empathy, not listening) (Bodenmann, 2005; Bodenmann et al., 2006).

While dyadic coping begins to address the way partners cope together, with the exception of common dyadic coping, it is focused more on how individuals react to each other's stress and help each other deal with stress than on how they interactively manage their feelings and experiences with stress together. Analyses of conjoining interactive processes of altering stress are limited (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998), so communication-focused investigations are necessary. Furthermore, existing conceptualizations of dyadic stress are based on normative stressors in everyday life (see Bodenmann et al., 2006). Investigations also need to include non-normative stressors. Non-normative stressors propel families into crisis (Patterson, 1988); and in crisis, dyadic coping between partners may take different forms.

Finally, family coping includes cognitive, emotional, relationship, communication, community, spiritual, and individual development strategies (Burr & Klein, 1994). Family coping is often considered coordinated problem-solving behavior, but it can also include the ways individual family members' personal efforts work together to create a whole (Patterson, 1988). When family members perceive co-ownership and shared responsibility of a stressor, they cope communally rather than in isolation (Afifi et al., 2006). Communal coping involves the collective action of individuals to pool their resources and confront adversity (Lyons et al., 1998). Afifi and colleagues (2006) outline four communal coping strategies for post-divorce families: family problem solving, direct confrontation of the stressors, organizing, structuring and

planning family life, and co-construction of privacy boundaries. Divorce is also considered an ambiguous loss event, so similar coping strategies are likely to emerge in deployed families. However, with the added complications and uncertainties of deployment, the approach to coping in families likely involves distinct strategies. Because families come back together following the deployment period, the coping strategies they employ could greatly influence the ease in which they reintegrate.

Because demands may change and capabilities may shift, coping is not static. Coping often requires “doses” of different types of strategies (Shuchter & Zisook, 1993). Coping attempts involve conflicting pulls between opposing forces that each demand attention. These opposing forces result from the need or desire to dismiss the emotional pain and anguish while also giving attention to the reality that exists (Shuchter & Zisook, 1993). Coping strategies must attend to both needs, which requires doses of opposing strategies like expression and avoidance. Although not intuitive, contradictory strategies can help promote adaptation and resilience, depending on the needs associated with the event at a specific time. Evaluating capabilities involves interpretations of the adequacy and sufficiency of the available resources and strategies (Patterson, 1988).

*Uncertainty management.* One coping strategy, highly relevant in the context of deployment, is uncertainty management. Uncertainty management is particularly important when coping with ambiguous loss, where uncertainty is a mainstay. Families facing stressful events such as deployment, divorce, illness, and death experience high levels of uncertainty. This uncertainty can stem from the re-organization of worldviews (Parkes, 1993; Patterson & Garwick, 1994; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2005), roles (Boss,

2006), power, patterns (Mederer, 1999), and identities (Boss, 2006; Patterson & Garwick, 1994; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993). It can also come from not knowing the outcome of the situation or the status of a significant other, as occurs in ambiguous loss situations such as illness, kidnapping, and war (Boss, 2007). As one military spouse recorded,

We try and prepare ourselves for the possible loss of life. ‘What if.’ What do I tell my children? What will I do, if that doorbell rings, and it is them? Will I have to call [his] family? Where will I go? How do I manage a military funeral? Will I be able to function? What will I tell these children? (AGAIN) I do not want a different life. I like my life...and it will be gone (Spouse Buzz, 2007).

When faced with uncertainty, change, and ambiguity, individual features of resilience or coping resources include control, mastery (Patterson, 2002; Thoits, 1995), and self-esteem (Thoits, 1995). Interactional features include planning and boundary flexibility (Mederer, 1999). Gaining a sense of control reduces psychological disturbance, physical illness, and negative mental health symptoms (Thoits, 1995; Turner & Roszell, 1994). These features may seem impossible in the face of the change, disorganization, and disruptiveness associated with family stress, crisis, and ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006; Patterson, 1988), but uncertainty management is a communicative strategy that might help families deal with these challenges and gain the individual resources needed to cope with stress.

Uncertainty management stems from uncertainty reduction theory, which posits that individuals seek communication with others in order to understand and predict their behaviors (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). This communicatively attained ability to

understand and predict behavior helps to reduce uncertainty in initial interactions (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Then, as uncertainty is reduced, and more personal information is exchanged, relationships can move from a non-personal to personal level, which can influence perceptions of feeling supported (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984). Over the past two decades, new perspectives on uncertainty have come to light. Uncertainty management perspectives (Brashers, 2001; Goldsmith, 2001) highlight not only the reduction of uncertainty, but also the evaluation or substantive meaning of uncertainty and subsequent actions. So in a given context, it is not simply the level of uncertainty that matters; it is the meaning constructed for the uncertainty and the subsequent appraisals. Therefore, depending upon the level, valence, and tolerance of the uncertainty, individuals may want to reduce, maintain, or even increase it.

Communication is central to uncertainty management. People use communication to manipulate uncertainty (reducing, maintaining, or increasing), through the seeking and/or avoiding of information (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004; Goldsmith, 2001) and social support (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Mishel, 1997; 1999). Information and support work together to manage uncertainty in stressful situations. Brashers, Neidig, and Goldsmith (2004) found that seeking social support helps manage uncertainty, through assistance with information seeking and avoiding, provision of instrumental support, skill development, acceptance and validation, and encouraging perspective shifts, for people living with HIV/AIDS. Yet, support-assisted uncertainty management does not come without costs and complications.

Uncertainty management has conflicting goals that cause dilemmas (Goldsmith, 2001). Although often helpful, seeking and accepting support can also diminish one's feelings of control (Brashers et al., 2004) and threaten one's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; MacGeorge, Lichtman, & Pressey, 2002), which can be detrimental to uncertainty management. Furthermore, uncertainty management goals can easily be mismatched across interactants, leaving one partner with undesired levels of certainty and/or uncertainty following the supportive interaction (Brashers et al., 2004). This relationship between seeking support and uncertainty management should incite further research, especially in the context of stressful family events. Knowing that seeking support to manage uncertainty can have both positive and negative effects, theory development is necessary to help explicate situations where different types of support will be helpful or harmful and why (Brashers et al., 2004; Goldsmith, 2001). The efficacy of support is likely based on the skill with which seekers and providers can respond to the conflicting goals associated with uncertainty management (Brashers, 2001; Goldsmith, 2001). Uncertainty is multilayered, interconnected, and temporal, so the effectiveness of management responses depends highly upon the situation in which the uncertainty is embedded (Brashers, 2001). Therefore, it is important to understand the contextual experience of uncertainty, and the subjective meaning attributed to uncertainty, in order to produce the most effective assistance for the people who are seeking support as a way to manage uncertainty and deal with stress.

Overall, coping strategies begin to explain the processes involved in resilience, but how these strategies interact with each other within the family and with respect to

specific stressors is less clear (Olsson et al., 2003). Coping involves a range of processes and diverse mechanisms (Rutter, 1999), which likely work together to more fully represent the resilience process. Making the process even more complex, coping can be contextually bound in terms of the family, social environment, and stressful event(s). Understanding the personal experience of different strategies, as they work together and are embedded within a specific context, will help develop the coping and family stress literatures. As such, the current study examines coping strategies as wives/mothers enact them individually, and feel they work with other members of the family to maintain them, within the context of deployment. In other words, analyzing coping strategies or processes includes what women report doing, individually and with others, to manage the demands they perceive during deployment. Coping resources, thought of as what people *have*, are also important when trying to understand processes of coping and resilience.

### *Coping Resources*

Researchers organize coping, or protective, resources as individual/personal, social/familial, and societal/extra-familial/community/environmental. Individual or personal resources include biological, psychological factors, and experiential factors such as temperament (Emery & Forehand, 1994; Gore & Eckenrode, 1994), gender, age, self-efficacy, empathy (Emery & Forehand, 1994), intelligence (Emery & Forehand, 1994; Farrington, 1986; Patterson, 1988), mastery, self-esteem, skills (Emery & Forehand, 1994; Gore & Eckenrode, 1994; Patterson, 1988; Thoits, 1995), resourcefulness (Farrington, 1986), and prior experience (Farrington, 1986; Gore & Eckenrode, 1994). Social or, more specifically, familial response capabilities include internal resources (e.g.,

intimacy, communication ability), social support systems (Farrington, 1986; Thoits, 1995), combined individual member resources (Farrington, 1986), warm, supportive parents, and good family relationships (Emery & Forehand, 1994). Family cohesion (e.g., trust, appreciation, support, integration, respect) and adaptability are two variables also often included as familial protective factors (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979; Patterson, 1988; Stinnet & Sauer, 1977). Extra-familial, societal, community, or environmental factors involve supportive networks (Emery & Forehand, 1994; Gore & Eckenrode, 1994; Patterson, 1988), successful school experiences (Emery & Forehand, 1994), community services, policies, (Patterson, 1988), income (Gore & Eckenrode, 1994), and other available outside resources.

Research on coping resources does not emphasize the personal agency commonly associated with coping and resilience. For example, personal factors (e.g., control, self-esteem, resourcefulness) tend to be viewed as more stable characteristics that affect coping styles (see Parkes, 1984). Social resources also appear as checklist items in the FAAR Model. Good relationships, good communication, and family cohesion are checked off as resources the family has or does not have. It becomes clear here that coping resources need to be studied less in terms of something individuals and families *have*, as they are discussed in the FAAR Model (Patterson, 1988), and more in terms of something people require, seek, obtain, and evaluate. People might be able to shift personal characteristics (e.g., gain control, improve self-esteem, become resourceful), and it is important to understand whether or not and how they do this. People are also likely able to improve family cohesion, communication, relationships, and other social

resources. Yet how and when they do (or do not do) this in the midst of stressful events is less clear. These questions tie coping resources more closely to coping strategies or behaviors, focusing on the actions people take to acquire the resources (e.g., individual and family characteristics) they need to adapt to stressful events.

*Social support.* One such action that people take to acquire resources involved seeking support, as previously discussed with uncertainty management. Social support is one of the most highly studied coping resources (Thoits, 1995). The role of communication in coping has been grounded in social support (Afifi & Nussbaum, 2006) because social support is often communicative in nature and has become a primary resource assumed to facilitate coping. Scholars have offered different categorizations of support, including emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental support (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; House, 1981), and these different types of support serve a variety of functions.

General functions of support, which are relevant to the process of coping and resilience, include allowing the recipient to vent, offering reassurance, aiding in improved communication skills, reducing uncertainty in times of stress, providing companionship, and assisting in mental/physical recovery (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984). According to the FAAR Model, which recognizes the role of good communication (and support) in strengthening capabilities of handling stress, emotional (or affective) support allows providers to offer love and support and recipients the chance to communicate feelings and emotions (Patterson, 2002). Informational support provides advice or suggestions about how one is doing (Patterson, 1988). Instrumental support offers aid (Patterson,

1988) and the opportunity to figure out how things will be done, especially in terms of decisions, rules, and roles (Patterson, 2002). These supportive functions are likely tied to family cohesiveness and flexibility, which are both thought to be protective factors aiding in family resilience, though this connection has not been made empirically.

Support is, however, credited with having a positive influence on people and their health. Research suggests that social support contributes to psychological wellbeing (e.g., LaRocco & Jones, 1978; Lin, Simeone, Ensel, & Kuo, 1979; Williams, Ware, & Donald, 1981) and may facilitate coping with stress (Rook, 1984). A direct relationship has also been found between social support and mental and physical health (Bal, Crombez, Van Oost, & Debourdeaudhuij, 2003; Stroebe, Zech, Stroebe, & Abakoumkin, 2005; Thoits, 1995), yet *why* support helps achieve these effects is not clear. Questions remain as to whether support is just generally helpful (Bal et al., 2003; Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; Stroebe, et al., 2005; Thoits, 1995) or can be uniquely helpful in different situations, through buffering stress (Bal et al., 2003; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Stroebe et al., 2005; Thoits, 1995) or aiding in recovery (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2005; Stroebe et al., 2005). It appears that social support affects stressed and non-stressed individuals in similar ways (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2005); it is positively related to health for both. An exception here is that *perceived* emotional support has been associated with both direct effects on mental health and a buffering effect on the negative impact of stressful events (Thoits, 1995).

Although the path is less clear, it is thought that support can reduce negative affect, promote positive affect, and/or promote healthier behaviors (Segrin & Flora,

2005). Yet there is limited information regarding which supportive messages are most helpful in producing positive effects across different domains where different stressors are experienced and varied types of support are needed. In a study conducted with military wives, perceived support from other military wives was the only type of support found as a significant buffer against stress during routine absences of the husband (Rosen & Moghadam, 1990). Other researchers report that informal (e.g., friends, family, neighbors), formal (e.g., agencies, chaplains, doctors), and unit (e.g., support groups, chain of command) support help military families cope with wartime deployment (Rosen, Durand, & Martin, 2000). While this begins to explain helpful sources of support, the helpful messages these sources of support provide are still not clear.

Helpful attempts at support occur when communication features are adapted to the conflicting goals and dilemmas inherent in social support interactions (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). In other words, and according to the matching hypothesis of support, support strategies should be used in different ways depending upon the factors and demands surrounding the situation (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cutrona & Russell, 1990). For example, expressions of concern, love, and understanding were considered the most helpful support messages in a study examining helpful and unhelpful support attempts with people suffering from multiple sclerosis (Lehman & Hemphill, 1990). Adolescents faced with parental deployment found understanding, listening, distracting, assuring, opportunities for expressing, informing, and help with tasks as helpful forms of support (Huebner & Mancini, 2005). However, many of these adolescents were displeased with

people who claimed to understand, and many said they were tired of talking about deployment (Huebner & Mancini, 2005).

To further develop family stress theory, in terms of coping resources such as support, it is necessary to understand the demands of the stressful situation, the subjective interpretations of those demands, the interactions others attempt to assist coping, and the subjective interpretations of those interactions to develop theoretically based models of communicating support in stressful family circumstances. In other words, which resources and interactions do people find helpful or unhelpful, and why do they find them helpful or unhelpful based on their interpretations of the challenges and needs with which they are faced?

Developing a better understanding of stress-event support is especially important because although social support is thought to be beneficial in many cases, it can be done poorly. Negative social interactions may occur less frequently than positive interactions; yet when they occur they arouse considerable distress (Rook, 1998), frustration, and disappointment (Rook, 2003), which can exacerbate the other's stress (Coyne, Wortman, & Lehman, 1988), increase emotional distress, and detract from health and wellbeing (Rook, 2003). In an interview study with 25 people who had suffered the loss of a loved one, participants mentioned that most (80%) statements they received from others were unhelpful (Davidowitz & Myrick, 1984). Statements, from least to most helpful, included advice/evaluation, interpretation/analysis, reassuring/support, questions, clarifying/summarizing, and feeling focused statements (Davidowitz & Myrick, 1984). Notably, advice and reassurance, often assumed to be helpful, were not. Researchers have

also characterized unsupportive responses as minimizing, forcing cheerfulness, avoiding contact, communication and feelings, criticizing, judging, patronizing, expressing excessive worry, making rude comments, and expressing inappropriate expectations (Ingram, Betz, Mindes, Schmitt, & Smith, 2001). Other unhelpful supportive attempts have been described as those seeming intrusive, insincere, dismissive, or avoidant (Barbee, Derlega, Sherburne, & Grimshaw, 1998).

The proposition that both intrusive and dismissive or avoidant strategies are unhelpful creates a paradox for support providers. Do they attempt to help and risk seeming intrusive? Or do they give the target space and risk appearing avoidant or dismissive? The answer is likely dependent upon the targets' goals for the interaction (e.g., avoiding and/or confronting the situation). For example, person-centered support is considered the most effective type of emotional support (Burleson, 1994; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Person-centeredness refers to how well the message "reflects an awareness of and adaptation to the subjective, affective, and relational aspects of communication contexts" (Burleson, 1987, p. 305). This type of emotional support involves acknowledgments and inquiries of the target's emotional and cognitive states, expressions of compassion and understanding, and encouragement of the target elaborating on his or her feelings (Burleson, 1994). According to supportive communication and comforting research, this expression-based approach is a positive support strategy. However, this support may be unhelpful, or even harmful, to people who are not interested in or comfortable with discussing feelings. The provider, following prescriptions for how to be a good supporter, will fall short in his or her supportive

attempts because the support strategy does not meet the targets goals or needs. Again, it is important to gain insight into what types of support recipients find most helpful or unhelpful. Furthermore, why are certain messages and behaviors helpful or unhelpful, in terms of the way they aid or do not aid in the ability to cope with stressful life events?

Examining support from a more situational perspective (stress-event support, in the current study), and establishing clearer information about which messages are helpful or harmful, is beneficial to both targets and providers. The benefit for receivers has been established above (e.g., health benefits), but a key aspect of support as an interaction is that it can also have positive effects for the provider. People who can produce effective comforting messages are perceived more positively and are accepted more by peers than those who are unable to produce effective comforting messages (Burleson, 1994). Providing effective support can also help improve providers' moods and self-evaluations (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). On the other hand, providers who use less effective message strategies are more anxious and depressed following their interaction with a depressed other (Notarius & Herrick, 1988). Research on the messages sent and received will help us understand coping and resilience for individuals as both the receivers and providers, which is important when discussing mutual family stress because providing support could act as a coping strategy in addition to being considered a coping resource. The current study addresses how individuals, as both recipients and potential providers of support, use communication as a coping resource and strategy.

Support and uncertainty management are communication-based coping resources and strategies that have received scholarly attention and are likely important for

individuals and families coping with deployment. However, military family members likely seek and employ various other coping resources and strategies as well. The current study explores these various communicative coping strategies and resources. It also further investigates the contextual experience of coping, including which resources and strategies are most helpful or unhelpful, and how and why are they experienced differently within the subjective experience of deployment.

### *Conclusion*

#### *Summary*

Deployment is considered a catastrophic family stressor involving danger, which can lead to feelings of helplessness, loss, disruption, destruction (McCubbin & Figley, 1983; Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994), and other negative psychological and behavioral consequences. Stress resilience, or effective functioning and adaptation (Olsson et al., 2003), involves having or obtaining the response capabilities, including coping strategies and resources, necessary for dealing with the demands posed by the stressful event (Olsson et al., 2003; Patterson, 1988; Patterson, 2002). So in order to understand the resilience process during deployment, we need to assess individuals' experiences with the stressful event, including meanings they make about the demands, challenges, or privileges they face and coping resources and strategies they seek, obtain, and enact. Next, expanding this understanding of coping and resilience to the family level requires knowledge about how these individual factors are experienced within the context of the family, including how family members' personal experiences of deployment are

interpreted as part of the family experience and how individuals feel they work together with other family members to cope with deployment.

Finally, stressful events such as deployment are on-going and ever-changing. As such, stress experiences and coping strategies and resources are also likely dynamic. The dynamic and complex coping process, and how it is enacted in the family during deployment, requires further investigation. Because the current focus is on communication, particular attention is paid to communicative coping strategies and resources family members discuss as helpful or harmful to the coping process, including support, uncertainty management, and other interactive processes. Additionally, because meaning making is of particular importance to resilience and coping with stress and loss, how individuals interpret the deployment experience is also explored.

In sum, the goal of the current research is two-fold: 1) To further understand the deployment experience, as it is lived personally and within the family. Understanding experiences involves investigating meanings made (perceptions of challenges, privileges, roles, capabilities, etc.) and the meaning making process. 2) To develop a theory-based resilience model, guided by family stress and resilience theory, highlighting the role of communication within the family resilience process. A neglected theoretical possibility in stress research is that there are multiple pathways toward the same positive outcomes (Thoits, 1995). Experiential and contextual data help construct a more complex and thorough picture of the resilience process, including both positive and negative coping strategies and resources, as the individuals and families faced with a stressful event experience it. This more nuanced model, grounded in communication, can assist

individuals and families in maintaining resilience in the face of stressful events and ambiguous loss. It can also help educate practitioners, friends, and family members on how to better assist in the resilience process.

### *Research Questions*

Based on the previous literature on family stress, loss, coping, and resilience, the issues that require further investigation, and my research goals, my guiding research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do military spouses perceive and interpret their experience with spousal deployment? What meaning is made of their experience?

RQ2: How do spouses cope with the spousal deployment experience?

RQ3: How do spouses perceive the family deployment and coping experience? How do they incorporate their children into the deployment experience and coping process?

RQ4: What supportive resources and responses are most helpful for military spouses during spousal deployment, and why?

RQ5: What supportive resources and responses are most unhelpful for military spouses during spousal deployment, and why?

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Participants

The goal of the study was to gain deep insight into the experience of military family members in order to begin developing a communication-focused model of resilience based on the lived experience of individuals in families faced with a stressful event. As such, I was more concerned with depth than breadth of knowledge. I did not test a large number of families on specific coping strategies, resources, and outcomes. Instead, I explored the subjective experience of deployment and coping of a smaller number of individuals, including interpretations of deployment, coping behaviors, and supportive resources and responses. More specifically, I interviewed 26 military wives/fiancés living in the United States while their partners were deployed outside the United States (hereby termed the women or wives). All participants were currently experiencing the deployment of male partners. This design allowed me to access how individuals make sense of their personal, relational, and family experiences with deployment and coping as well as their interpretations of helpful and unhelpful responses from others. Participants' responses offer new insights into the process of resilience, particularly in terms of what impedes and facilitates resilience and what role communication plays in this process.

### *Recruitment*

Recruiting a sensitive population (i.e., military wives in the midst of spousal deployment) can be difficult and needs to be handled carefully. Any one method of recruitment can be problematic in that the sample may not be representative of the

broader population experiencing deployment. Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board, I used four recruitment techniques to recruit the most diverse sample possible: 1) online outreach, 2) organizational outreach, 3) network sampling, and 4) snowball sampling.

First, I used online resources including Craigslist.com, Meetup.com, and military spouse blogs to recruit participants. This approach required searching the “milblog” network and Meetup groups and then posting announcements and requests for participants. The approach was successful in reaching approximately one-third of the participants. Although the approach was proving successful, I did not want to solely rely on technology for recruitment, as those using blogs and seeking online Meetup groups may represent a more outward and open segment of the population. I also utilized organizational outreach and network sampling. These approaches required contacting different organizations and people connected to military populations, including military groups (e.g., Family Readiness Groups), military website organizers, counselors, professors, and peers. These techniques helped me reach approximately one-fifth of the sample. Finally, I exercised snowball sampling. Following each interview I requested that participants, if interested, passed along my information to other military wives experiencing deployment. Participants emailed my information to others, called other wives, or blogged about my study. Each technique was successful; many of the participants helped me recruit one or more additional participants. Snowball sampling resulted in almost one-half of the total participants.

Relying on these various recruitment procedures, rather than relying on technology or military groups alone, allowed a more diverse sample to volunteer for participation, including participants in various branches of the military and in different areas across the country. Furthermore, snowball sampling assisted in reaching a more “unlikely” group of participants. Some women said they did not normally participate in such studies, but because a trusted friend recommended my research, they chose to participate. Military wives are known for protecting each other, as many wives told me, so having the endorsement of military wives helped in recruitment.

#### *Sample Demographics*

All participants were female ( $N = 26$ ) with male partners currently deployed to areas including Iraq, Afghanistan, Korea, and the Caribbean. Two women had also previously, but no longer, served in the military (7.7%). Some women were experiencing their first spousal deployment, where other women were on their second, third, fourth, or fifth spousal deployments ( $M = 2.15$ ). The women’s ages ranged from 20 to 40 years ( $M = 27.42$ ). Twenty-one women were White/Caucasian (80.8%), two were Hispanic/Latina (7.7%), and three reported mixed ethnicity (11.5%). Partner’s ethnicities included seventeen White/Caucasian (65.4%), one Black/African-American (3.8%), four Hispanic/Latino (15.4%), and three mixed ethnicity (11.5%). One wife did not specify her partner’s ethnicity (3.8%).

The length of marriage between partners ranged from approximately one month to 11 years ( $M=5.33$ ). Two participants were engaged to be married, one for four months and the other for two years. The number of children ranged from zero to four ( $M=1.23$ ),

with sixteen of the women reporting having children. One woman's child did not live with her, so she did not have children at home with her during deployment. Another woman had two children who did not live with her, but she had two children who were still living in her household. Children living in the households ranged in age from four months to eleven years old. Finally, in terms of joint family income, two women reported less than \$25,000 (7.7%), nine reported between \$25,000 and \$50,000 (34.6%), eight reported between \$50,000 and \$75,000 (30.8%), five reported between \$75,000 and \$100,000 (19.2%), and two did not report income (7.7%).

## Design

### *Benefits of a Qualitative Approach*

To analyze individuals' perceptions of their own situations, coping strategies, and resources, it is necessary to gain a more phenomenological perspective through in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews were chosen for the current study for four reasons. First, in-depth interviews may offer a space for healing and growth for the participants (McAdams, 1993). Similar to the therapeutic function of writing stories (Pennebaker, 1997), verbally sharing stories may also be therapeutic (Gale, 1992; Rando, 1986) for military spouses. Because the participants were undergoing the stress and strain of deployment, interviews had the opportunity to provide a therapeutic function.

Second, interviews "allow researchers to ask about communication events too time-consuming or too private to observe" (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1992, p. 285), which is especially relevant when talking to individuals about the experiences, coping, and communication associated with military deployment and ambiguous loss.

Rather than interrupting spouses' private phone calls and family interactions, or observing spouses' coping behaviors (which are often unobservable), interviews allowed participants to reflect on and report their interpretations of these events and processes.

Third, a phenomenological interview approach helps unpack the essence of lived experience (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002); it “asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a some-‘thing’ what it is—and without which it could not be what it is” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10). This approach also serves as a method for analyzing social routines and interpreting communicative experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), and offers an increased potential for depth, openness, and detail (Patton, 2002) that can provide vivid, meaningful description to help understand a given phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 2002). With these functions of a phenomenological, and potentially therapeutic, interview approach in mind, the current study sought to understand what made the deployment experience ‘what it was’ and the coping strategies and resources ‘what they were’ to the individuals experiencing them. Each of these three potential functions of the qualitative approach will be further reflected upon in the next sections.

Finally, the underlying theories in the study corroborate my design choices. Because the subjective meaning of stress and resilience is the focus, rather than prediction or control, qualitative methods are more appropriate to gaining insight into the deployment experience. Additionally, ambiguous loss theory assumes that ambiguous loss is a matter of perception. Although it cannot easily be measured quantitatively, ambiguity exists phenomenologically (Boss, 2007). There is not an attainable truth,

because the truth is subjective and perceptual, and therefore the goal (for those experiencing ambiguous loss) is to find the meaning within the situation (Boss, 2007). This same goal or focus on meaning pertains to researchers, and consequently interpretive approaches and analyses are most compatible with the theory (Boss, 2007).

### *Current In-depth Interviews*

For the current study, in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face and over the telephone. Telephone interviews were conducted in order to gain access to more participants, in various military branches and on various military posts, who did not live within driving distance from the interviewer. Twenty interviews were face-to-face and six were via telephone. Telephone interviews reached wives from four Southeast, Southwest, West, and Midwest cities. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a location convenient for and chosen by the participants. Locations included the researcher's on-campus office, coffee shops, and the participants' (or their friends'/family's) homes in three different Southwest cities. The wives represented three branches of the military: Air Force, Marines, and Army.

Following IRB guidelines, all participants were informed of measures taken to protect confidentiality. Each participant provided consent for recording the interviews; so all interviews were recorded with a digital recording device or telephone micro-recorder. Participants were given an interview number and pseudonym, so no names were recorded on the audio files. Forms with any identifiable labels were kept separate from the data. Interviews lasted between 47 and 128 minutes ( $M=94.9$ ), and participants were given the

option to stop the interviews or take breaks as needed. Many women took short breaks to attend to personal, pet, or child needs during the interviews.

The structure of the interview is important because the interview process can influence the data collected. Three types of interviews are useful for qualitative research: highly structured, moderately structured, and unstructured (Frey et al., 1992). For the current study, and based on the phenomenological approach, I utilized moderately structured interviews, which allowed me to begin with a broad set of questions and probe for additional information in a more spontaneous manner. Probes were used to “deepen the response to a question, to increase the richness and depth of responses, and give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired” (Patton, 2002, p. 372). In other words, the participants were given the freedom to discuss the proposed topics openly and without interruption. They created their own narratives, and as the researcher I was there to guide the conversation and elicit specific personal stories and examples to add richness to the responses. Telling stories reveals people’s meanings about an experience or relationship (Weber, Harvey, & Stanley, 1987; Weiss, 1975). It requires individuals to provide structure to their experiences, label feelings, and develop explanations (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). Accessing detailed personal narratives is well suited to exploring the underlying meaning and ever-changing experience of deployment and resilience because it contributes to understanding the lives of the tellers from their own perspectives (Bailey, 1996; Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994) and promotes the emergence of themes that transcend each individual story (Gilbert, 2002).

The moderately structured interview style was effective in providing women with the opportunity to interpret general questions and express the aspects of their experiences they felt were most salient to them personally. It also allowed me to reach individual perspectives on spousal deployment. During the interviews it became apparent that the questions tapped into a profound existing personal experience. The women laughed and cried, showing the intense and varied emotions they were experiencing. They also provided complex answers to the questions, offering deep and thoughtful insight rather than gliding over the surface of their experiences. For example, women were first asked to generally discuss their spousal deployment experience. Then, the interview protocol continued into more specific facets of the experience, asking women to reflect on the challenges/benefits of deployment and how the deployment influenced them individually, their relationships, their daily lives, etc. When asked the first general question, many women went into depth immediately, discussing various challenges and the multiple areas of their lives set forth (but not yet reached) in the interview protocol. As such, the more detailed probing questions often served as summarizing technique for the detailed narratives they provided and allowed the participants to reflect further on their experiences. See Appendix A for a general understanding of the interview schedule.

My overall perception of the interviews was that these women had previously thought a lot about deployment and how it was affecting their lives. The interviews gave them the opportunity to let out the uncertainties, complaints, joys, challenges, benefits, changes, and feelings that made up their experiences, and they were very willing to do so. When asked questions, they did not have to think about the “right” answers; they had

them, and they were their personal stories. These stories had ups and downs, highs and lows; they were complex; they were sad; they were hopeful; they had personal meaning and significance. They were perceptions about life as it was disrupted by spousal deployment. These profound stories were tapped in the interviews and will be shared in the results.

### *Limitations of a Qualitative Approach*

Despite the strengths of using this qualitative design, there are also limitations and challenges. First, in terms of data analysis, although a qualitative approach allows access to perceived experiences with stress and coping, it does not enable statistical assessment of significant decreases in stress or increases in recovery based on coping strategies and resources. The effectiveness of coping and how it facilitates resilience is analyzed from a more personal, subjective perspective—seeking to understand what types of coping strategies and resources family members feel are helpful and how this affects their experiences with deployment and the challenges associated with it.

Second, in-depth interviews can be highly time and cost intensive and may also be considered intrusive when working with a sensitive population. For me, as the researcher, the interview methods required traveling to different areas of the state to conduct interviews. This process was costly, both in terms of time and money. For example, driving to and from interviews took up to three hours time, with only one or two interviews conducted with each trip. The study also required high commitment in terms of time and disclosure from the participants. To underscore the voluntary nature of the study, I fully disclosed the demands to participants and reiterated with each step of the

process that at no time should they feel obligated to continue if participation was creating additional strain. Although the level of involvement was high, I believe the data produced using in-depth qualitative interviews add richness and depth to the study of deployment and coping. Because multiple participants promoted the study to other military wives and reported positive reactions to participation (discussed below), it can be assumed that many of the women also felt the benefits of participating outweighed the costs.

### Participant Reactions

Because the focus of a phenomenological approach is on the participants' perspectives and rich description of a phenomenon, and also because I was aware of potential costs and benefits of participation, I sought women's reactions to participating in the in-depth interviews. Several women provided unsolicited reactions immediately following the interview or via email days after the interview. In response to this feedback, I sent out an email to all participants (with the exception of one woman who did not provide an email address) to seek participant reactions. Six women responded to the email. In a sample of post-interview and follow-up reactions to participating in the current research project, it becomes apparent that some women did in fact find the interviews to be therapeutic:

I had a great time talking with you today, sorry for getting so emotional, I think it may have been a bit therapeutic though. It isn't every day that someone wants to sit down with me and let me spill the beans on how the deployments have affected me. Thank you for being so understanding with everything that I was talking about; you are awesome (#19).

I found it therapeutic to talk to a neutral third party about what I was feeling since my husband had just left only 2 months before...It was a good experience for me and I was intrigued with the research [the researcher] was doing. This is a very real and personal subject for me and the women that face this situation everyday, deployment after deployment (#14).

I felt relieved after talking to you because I felt like you were open to hearing me and I didn't have to feel bad that I was wasting a friend's time by venting for an hour. I thought about how therapy might be very important in my healing process and in overcoming any resentment I have. I still haven't seen a therapist and I don't know that I've fully let go of my resentment. After the phone conversation, I thought several times about and found myself curious about what your conclusions were after all of your interviews and if you found anything that could be helpful to me and other Army wives in the future in the case that we have to do another one of these deployments (#18).

Some enjoyed the opportunity to further reflect upon their experiences and felt they learned something about themselves through participating in the interviews:

I was happy to be able to give you and whomever might read your dissertation an insight of how life really is. Doing the interview made me think more about how I have reacted to certain situations being without my husband. I am more aware of what and how I do things regarding my kids and being their only available parent. I learned that I needed to find a way to deal with the stresses (#23).

I thought the interview would help me understand my perspective a little more. Answering questions makes you think about things a little more in depth. I was kind of excited to share my experience because I think a lot of people have such a negative perspective on deployment...I thought it was a good experience to analyze yourself in a way. I know I realized that I'm actually growing a lot more over this deployment, and our relationship (me and my husband) is developing in a different way (#24).

From the responses, it appears that participating in the interviews offered a therapeutic outlet for participants to “vent” their feelings to a neutral, interested party. Talking about their experiences allowed these women to share their personal stories with a neutral party and also reflect upon their situations. Sharing stories was important in that participants felt they were able to get their feelings and experiences out and help people understand their circumstances. This lends credence to my own interpretations of the interviews as opportunities for women to share the emotions, challenges, and experiences that had built up over the course of the deployment. Many women were also hopeful that their own participation would in turn aid in helping military families cope with deployment. Reflection was seen in the depth of the women’s responses as well as in follow-up emails I received offering me further insights into the questions I asked, links to resources I should look up, and even further information about how a participant had progressed in her relationship since our conversation. The time of the interview was neither the first nor the last time they had and would think about deployment and its impact on their lives.

It is possible that negative reactions to participating also existed; however, I did not receive any feedback on negative responses. All reactions I received, both solicited and unsolicited, were positive and focused mainly on the therapeutic and reflective function of participation. Again, many of the participants also made referrals to other military wives, which implies endorsement of participating as well as a positive experience with their own participation.

### Data Analysis

The qualitative, phenomenological approach recognizes the value of the description of unique individual experiences and provides a foundation for defining and interpreting those descriptions (Peterson, 1987), which can be accomplished with systematic and layered thematic analysis. As the researcher, my role involved listening, reporting, interpreting, and participating in the interview process (Ellis & Bochner, 1992; Gilbert, 2002). As the analyst, my role also included making decisions about organization and interpretation of the data (Gilbert, 2002). Upon gathering data, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. I transcribed 11 interviews, and an assistant transcribed 15 interviews. For the interviews I did not transcribe myself, I listened to the full interviews, while reading the transcriptions, to check for any errors and to gain a sense of the vocal components and tone of the interviews. Overall, errors were minimal, and I only needed to fill in location and acronym details with which the other transcriber was less familiar. Reviewing the interviews and immersing myself in the data, through transcribing and listening, helped improve my own familiarity with the data and allowed me to form initial impressions. These initial impressions were documented as analytical notes and reviewed

throughout the analysis process. In sum, the interviews yielded 579 single-spaced pages (11-point font) of transcription data.

Once interviews were reviewed and transcribed, I conducted a thematic analysis of the data. This type of analysis refers to the “qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Locating, interpreting, and defining the themes emerging from the data was done using constant comparative analysis (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

First, I organized the transcriptions broadly based on the guiding research questions, color-coding the data line-by-line to demarcate where responses related to the research questions (e.g., meaning making, experience, coping, support). Where broad new ideas emerged, particularly salient within the data but not specifically accounted for by the research questions, additional color-coded categories were added (e.g., relational experience, people who “understand”). After color-coding the transcriptions, data were extracted from the transcriptions and organized into a spreadsheet. This allowed me to minimize, visualize, and analyze the data within each participant as well as across multiple participants. In other words, full narratives were reduced into single line fragments for organizational and analytical purposes. Using the organized and reduced raw data, I openly coded the interview data to discover, create, name, and explain multiple preliminary categories that emerged (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Strauss, 1987). This step involved interpreting, labeling, and defining initial themes within the broader research question-based organizing scheme. Next, I analyzed and compared participants’

responses in order to place them within appropriate categories, based on the properties of the initial category descriptions. For example, missing hugs and missing touch during conversations could be combined and labeled as a loss of physical affection.

Finally, I analyzed the data using axial coding. During this stage, the multiple categories were integrated and/or collapsed into more inclusive and manageable themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). When two or more categories overlapped or were interpreted as closely related, they were combined to create a larger, more inclusive theme (Golby & Bretherton, 1999). This step was done in an effort to present a more coherent and organized picture of the overall data, including all participants and based on broad relations between responses, rather than restating the raw data in its original form. Once the data were analyzed into clear and distinguishable themes, the results were written using participants' words to exemplify each theme. First, an effort was made to use the women's words to create *in vivo* codes for labeling each theme and also for defining the themes. Second, participants' quotes were used to bring their voices to the forefront, providing evidence as well as vivid life descriptions for each theme.

To add rigor to the analysis, and credibility to the themes, I used triangulation and other analytical techniques. The idea behind triangulation is that if multiple sources, investigators, methods, or theories converge to provide similar results, then credibility is strengthened (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Krefting, 1990). I utilized source triangulation; meaning I used various quotes and exemplars from different participants to evidence different themes in the data (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). In addition to source triangulation, I also conducted peer debriefing, a member check, and negative case analysis.

First, “peer debriefing involves exposing data and interpretations to a respected colleague in order to point up possible sources of misinterpretation and the ‘suppression’ of themes or voices that do not ‘fit’ the ‘storyline’” (Baxter & Eyles, 1997, p. 514). Because my transcription assistant held both undergraduate and graduate degrees in Communication Studies and Social and Cultural Psychology, and was intricately familiar with more than half of the data, I trusted her as a resource for peer debriefing. She reviewed the written results, and we discussed her interpretations of the findings, noting her agreement and/or disagreement with my interpretations of the themes and her general insights regarding the analysis and results. Overall, she found the results representative of the data with which she was familiar. She did, however, offer suggestions for improving the clarity of themes, based on her knowledge of particular participant responses and existing research.

Second, member checking is another way to account for credibility of the data representation (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In interpretive qualitative inquiry, it is important to get at the participant’s point of view (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), and member checking helps enable this practice. Member checking requires checking the adequacy of the finding with members of the groups from which data was collected (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Hammersley (1992) cautions that participants do not have “privileged access to the truth” (p. 65). However, they do have access to their own opinions and meanings (Baxter & Eyles, 1997), so they can make judgments on the adequacy of the representations in the results. It is ideal to member check with multiple participants, so four women were asked

to participate in this process. However, the women were extremely busy and only one participant was able to review the results and discuss her perceptions of how well the findings represented the deployment experience.

During the member checking process, the participant made various statements that helped verify the results were a good representation of her experience with deployment. First, she exclaimed, “That is *so* true,” as she read other women’s responses quoted in the text. Second, she was able to relate her own experiences to many of the themes, even when her own interview was not a representative quote presented in the results. Third, she often extended the ideas reported, and her ideas were always represented elsewhere in the results. Overall, she concluded that the results were adequate and representative of her experience and other’s experiences that she had witnessed. She appreciated the organization of the results and stated, “I am so happy to have some sense made out of a situation that at times seems to make no sense with no structure.”

In an attempt to further check how well the results represented the deployment experience and the resilience process, I conducted one additional interview. During this interview (using the same protocol), I checked the participants’ responses against the results of the study. Her responses did not present any new material that had not already been reported in the results. This further verified the verisimilitude of the results while also ensuring saturation had been reached in the data.

Peer debriefing and member checks also helped me conduct negative case analysis, another way to add rigor to qualitative research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Negative case analysis involves assessing when, where, and with whom

conclusions do not hold true; it is an inductive process of constantly revising and comparing themes across all data (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). This analysis “serves to explore numerous dimensions of a theme in order to make it robust” (Baxter & Eyles, 1997, p. 514). By analyzing the data within and across participants, conducting peer debriefing and member checks, and accounting for negative cases, I improved the credibility of the findings. In other words, I attempted to ensure that the finalized and reported themes represented the participants’ experiences as a whole. Although not all participants will ‘fit’ within every theme, each of their experiences should be recognizable within the overall results.

As a final note, throughout the discussion of the results, I will refer to the “women” or “wives” or “mothers.” I am not attempting to generalize to all women; I am referring to the trends within the current sample and interview responses. In analyzing the data, I reached saturation in that responses began to sound similar and no new and distinctive themes were being revealed (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As such, it is likely that additional participants (more women whose spouses are deployed) would report similar experiences. However, the current results are based in interpretations of the perceptions of the 26 women interviewed for this study. Pseudonyms are used throughout the results, and interview and line numbers are reported with each quote.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE EXPERIENCE AND MAKING SENSE OF IT

### Introduction

Research is often focused on the credibility, or validity in many cases, of the study design and results, but less often is there an emphasis on the validity of the research questions offered in the beginning. The method and analysis I employed highlighted the legitimacy and strength of the initial questions I posed and the context in which I posed them. Deployment is portrayed as more than just a context; deployment is a disruption within the lives of these women and their families. As stated, asking them questions gave them the opportunity to do more than think about and share information and thoughts. It offered a space for discussing issues already poignant within their minds, and these issues are emphasized within the results of the broad research questions. All women conveyed the stress and disruption deployment causes; yet they also emphasized the positive influence deployment can have on their lives and relationships. As such, I have organized their experiences, their coping behaviors, and the responses they receive from others in terms of both the positive and the negative, or benefits and challenges.

Spousal deployment is a life stressor that elicits a layered experience for military wives and their families. Although some women reported finding a groove over the course of spousal deployment, it remains a complex personal experience, rich with challenges, strains, and growth. This complex experience is also encountered over and over for many women, with challenges and benefits arising both while husbands are away and while they are home. This study focuses primarily on women's perceptions of their experiences while husbands are away. Challenges, strains, and even benefits stem in part

from the simple fact that husbands are gone. However, perceptions of these experiences are complicated by the knowledge that their husbands are away on active duty for the military during a time of war (and in war zones, in most cases) and by the many changes and strains they experience at home, with their husbands, and with their children. Overall, the deployment experience is extremely difficult and laden with emotions. Yet women are not only aware of the negative aspects of the experience; they also interpret positive effects of deployment on their lives and relationships. Only focusing on the negative makes the situation worse, and many say they simply cannot do this because they have a life, a home, and often children to maintain.

For the purpose of organizing a complex and often disorganized experience, I will separate the meaning these women make of their experiences based on the personal experience, relational experience, and family experience, each of which comes from the wives' points of view. Within each of these sections, themes and sub-themes will be discussed. Following the discussion of the meaning women make of their personal, relational, and family experiences, I will report two discursive strategies that emerged in the interviews as ways women were interpreting their overall experiences. The magnitude of the disruption deployment causes in these women's lives should become clear as the overall picture of the deployment is revealed and the women's stories are shared.

### Personal Experience

The personal experience for women is challenging, enlightening, and emotional. While their husbands are deployed, these women are left to care for the home and, in many cases, the children. They previously had a partner or a teammate for working

through life issues, decisions, chores, and other daily events, but now they continue these activities alone and often away from extended families and established friends. This burden, or opportunity, is deeply felt. Women report experiencing many changes at home that impair and enhance their lives and elicit positive and negative emotions. I will describe these women's personal experiences with the benefits and challenges of control, including personal control and situational control, and identity. I will also provide a summary of the positive and negative affective experience; though the strength and complexity of affect and emotions will be evident throughout the document.

### *Control*

Women reported various empowering and debilitating changes they experienced over the course of the deployment, and the adjustments they made or reactions they experienced in response to these changes. Personal control was one facet of the experience especially relevant to the fact that women were left alone to take care of the home, the children, and themselves. These feelings of personal control, however, were complex. Women felt their newly adopted control over tasks, routines, and decisions was empowering but also burdensome.

### *Control as Empowering*

First, women described positive aspects of the high levels of control felt during deployment. There was no one else to collaborate with, compete with, or answer to when it came to making decisions, so women found themselves being the primary decision makers in the family. They were also able to dictate their own schedules, which were no longer influenced by their husbands' comings and goings in the household. With this self-

determination sometimes came fewer chores and demands, as well as a more lenient routine and more time for the self. Frances found herself empowered as the family's decision maker:

But all the other decisions during the day, I do by myself. I guess he has to accept my way right now because even if he were to tell me to do something different I probably wouldn't because I'm alone with her and I have to deal with her every day, so I pretty much am on my own for that (#12; 149-152).

Taryn and Kari enjoyed the schedule leniency and freedom deployment allowed:

There's definitely pros. I don't have to have the house clean by 5 o'clock every day. I don't have to cook dinner every single night. We can have peanut butter and jelly if we want to. Um, everything doesn't have to be perfect all the time. Which, not so much that he expects that, but I expect that of myself when he's home. So I guess in a way it's not like it gets you leniency to be more lazy, but the leniency is there for me to choose to do other things... Just not having to answer to somebody all the time, you know, being able to walk out the door and not tell anybody where I'm going is kind of nice. There's a little bit more privacy there. Choosing what I spend my money on. Not having to you know make a joint decision on you know something simple like whether or not to buy a shirt or something. I don't know, just little things like that. (#9; 84-89, 94-98).

Like, I don't come home at a regular hour, ever. I mean I take night classes now 'cause what's the point of coming home at 6 o'clock every night to eat a frozen dinner and sit here by myself, you know?... Now that he left it's part of it's kind

of nice that I don't have to cook or clean up or I mean I eventually do but I don't have to like I don't have to be a homemaker. Maybe that's what it is. And I can you know whatever; I don't have to dress up as much. I don't know. I always describe it as like being single. I'm like yeah it's great! I go out with my friends, like on Friday [my friend] and I walked and exercised at [the University] and then we went to Whole Foods, and I didn't get home until like 10, and it was fun (#14; 336-338, 343-353).

### *Control as a Burden*

However, there is another side to women's perceptions of control. During deployment women became the executors of the household and the sole caretakers for children, so they were left alone to do everything at home and act as single moms, which proved to be very challenging. They often felt overwhelmed with the tasks and the decisions, feeling like it would be easier if they just had their husbands at home with them to share the burden. Riley and Heather expressed these challenges:

So I feel like I'm in a constant state of flux, you know, I don't know, sometimes you know what to let go, what to hold on to, what decisions to make, which ones to share with him, which ones I can handle on my own, ya know, it's very, it's difficult, it's hard, it's challenging, it always keeps us on our toes... The stress, knowing that I'm responsible for everything. If anything breaks in the house, something happens with the dogs, there's a bill that got messed up or something, I have to take care of it. And that brings a lot of anxiety to me as far as knowing that if anything comes to the house, or something happens I have to take care of it.

I am the sole provider. And knowing that if something happens to me, there's nobody here to take care of me (#05; 19-22, 35-40).

Having to manage everything by myself basically. I mean managing all the household chores, getting the lawn mowed, getting the floor mopped, and having to take care of the kids. Then dealing with other things, you know, you kind of would hope that life would stop a little bit during these things, but real life things just keep happening. So you have to deal with things on your own that would be easier to deal with as a couple (#08; 147-151).

Renee related her experience and challenges to being a single mom:

I guess the hardest part is that my husband is very involved with the family. I mean, he's very involved. And just having to do it by myself... Yeah being a mom and I'm an older mom, uh... I worked for 14 years. I taught school. And to all the sudden just put the breaks on and try to like do this mom thing has been a little tough. Especially doing it solo. That's what I tell my husband. I never signed up to be a single mom. I'm married. I shouldn't have to do this, that's the hardest part (#03; 67-68, 70, 72-75).

### *Situational Uncontrollability*

Although these women felt both benefits and challenges of control at home, most felt a sense of uncontrollability when it came to military life and the risks of deployment specifically. It seems there is a micro sense of control (over tasks, household decisions, etc.), but yet a macro sense of uncontrollability (over life structure, life decisions, etc.). Feelings of uncertainty and a lack of situational control were some of the most prominent

feelings among these military wives. More specifically, uncertainty involved constant questions about their husbands and wondering, “what if...?” These feelings often emerged when husbands did not or were unable to call home, but also because they were unable to contact their husbands to ask them questions or share what was going on at home. More broadly, these wives felt a lost sense of control because their lives were often planned around the military and deployments. They felt the military owned them and often controlled their life decisions. Emma reported uncertainty about her husbands’ circumstances:

The hardest I think is not knowing what he’s doing every day, you know? Is he ok? Is he safe? Every second I get where I’m not thinking about what to feed my daughter or what I should dress her in or what do I need to pack for daycare or I have this homework assignment due, it’s ‘I hope my husband is ok. I don’t know where he is. I don’t know what’s going on, but I hope he’s ok.’ But like you just have to kind of say a little prayer, you know, ‘Just watch over him, make sure nothing happens to him.’ So I think that’s probably the worst part is that instead of thinking about ‘Oh my husband’s doing great today,’ or ‘My husband got to call me today,’ you kind of think about what could go wrong (#20; 122-129).

Anette and Shawna, like many others, felt heightened levels of uncertainty because they were unable to contact their husbands:

Knowing that if I need him, that I cannot just call him and talk to him...And if there is anything like with our daughter or something, I can’t really just call him

and ask him or let him know what's going on. So that's the most hard part I think (#13; 40, 43-45).

But like that last three times he's called I haven't remembered to talk to him about it because I didn't have a list. So, I have to, you know, that's difficult too cause I don't really have control over when he calls and I can't call him (#15; 64-70).

Pamela and Danielle reported a lack of control in making larger life decisions:

You have to plan a lot more with the Army, you have to look for those times 'cause it's not like, you know, if you work in corporate America, you ask, 'Hey, can I have March 5<sup>th</sup> through March 10<sup>th</sup> off?' You know? No. No, you don't do that with the Army. You plan, 'Ok, when's block leave? When can we do this? When can we?' You know, you plan around the Army, so you know that's been a new thing as far as planning vacations and even like larger stuff, planning on having kids (#16; 231-236).

'Cause I don't really know much about his job. So I don't really care to know his schedule. We are very much a need to know family, as far as military goes. Uncle Sam owns us. That's all I really need to know (#25; 430-432).

Even with the uncertainty and uncontrollability these women felt, most accepted the realities of living a military life. Most knew they would experience multiple deployments; they did not expect the current deployment to be the last. They also knew they would need to uproot their lives when they received orders for a permanent change of station (PCS). For a couple women, however, this uncontrollability was the impetus of their desire to leave the military. They did not want to live without control over their own

lives and choices. In either scenario, the impact of personal control and situational uncontrollability is clear. The benefits and challenges of control are also relevant in women's perceptions of the impact of deployment on their identities and affective experiences, which are discussed in the following sections.

### *Identity*

#### *Self-enhancement Opportunities*

In the midst of increased responsibility, as well as uncertainty, a majority of the wives noted opportunities to do things for themselves and increased independence or personal growth as self-enhancing changes brought on by deployment. These feelings stem naturally from the sense of control and schedule lenience noted above, as women were able to do things for themselves in their husbands' absence. Newly established or recognized independence made the women feel mature and strong; they were succeeding on their own, conquering challenges, pursuing new opportunities, and growing in the process. Averi, Stacey, and Riley illustrated these feelings of growth and independence well:

I just do whatever I want. Like it's all about me. Like when he left I realized my first job is to take care of myself, that nobody else is gonna take care of me, that I'm the only one to take care of me. I have to take care of heart, I have to take care of my spirit and you know, I essentially have to take care of myself, so it sounds selfish but I really feel like it's the best thing for me, I know it's the best thing for me to do. So I think I'm just a lot more, like what do I want to do? There's a lot less of what I feel like I should do (#18; 517-522).

I want to depend on him, and he knows that. Like I tell him, I'm like, 'I want to depend on you, but at the same time I don't want to because I want to learn how to function on my own.' I think that's a big part of being a mature adult is learning how to be on your own, which is, makes you look at this deployment experience as an opportunity to grow... Now I get to be a person different than just someone attached to another person. And I've actually been more outgoing and more social and, 'Hey let's go out' kind of thing, and it's like, it's been a lot of fun (#24; 231-235, 239-241).

There's a lot of personal growth with me. I know that I was the type of student that, I stayed at home and went to college and like a week after I graduated college, I moved in with my husband and we got married. And so, I never lived on my own, I never had roommates or anything like that, so for me it was a huge recognition that I could live, eat, breathe, and sustain myself, by myself, take care of myself and anything else that I needed to. So that's where my boosted independence came from (#05; 93-98).

Loren and Kristin discussed new opportunities they pursued during deployment:

You need to do things to be independent. You cry, but you need to learn to make your own way. You need to do things you wouldn't do especially because you when the husband is home you want to spend your time with him. Not all your time, but there are things you might not start when he's home. I am training for a triathlon. It is something to do, and raises confidence. I am not sure I would've done it if he was here (#00, 81-86).

So this year I was like, 'Oh it's the year about me,' so I went and I got a personal trainer, I'm like, I told him I had 10 weeks. I said, 'You gotta get me in shape in 10 weeks,' and he's like, 'Well we can try'...So I'm trying to focus on all the things that I can't focus on when he's home. 'Cause when he's home I want to be with him, so I'm not at the gym everyday, and I'm not going. I don't want to take classes, and I don't want to do all that other stuff. So I try and do all that when he's gone (#06; 111-117).

Many women also mentioned positive changes in their social demeanors while having their husbands deployed. Being home alone gave them the opportunity to go out and meet new people and participate in social activities they may not have otherwise experienced. As Emma and Taryn remarked,

And I'm kind of the opposite way, where I like to talk to people, but with my husband I've kind of, his attitude's kind of rubbed off on me a little bit, where I'm a little bit shy and hesitant to talk to people. But since he's been deployed, I don't have him to rub off on me. So that's why I've gone out to do like these volunteer things, and I've gone to luncheons for volunteer appreciation. I've met a lot of people that I wouldn't normally meet, like last night we had an event at someone's house, and every time I'm in those situations, I go, 'I would never be here if my husband were still here.' I would never be meeting these new people if my husband was still here. So it's like I love my husband, I miss him terribly, but at the same time I'm getting to experience all these great things that I wouldn't

normally do before, so that's kind of like a plus and minus I guess for how his deployment affects me (#20; 253-262).

I think I'm definitely a lot more outwardly social because I've had to be. It's not an option really. It's either you huddle up on your couch or you go out and meet people (#9; 114-116).

### *Identity Challenges*

Deployment made a positive impact on women's personal and social identities; however, not all identity changes were constructive. Some women felt the deployment challenged their sense of self and social identity. In terms of their personal identities, they highlighted feeling tired and just "going through the motions" of life without the before-felt vigor. And although most women reported greater independence during deployment, they also talked about an identity struggle. This occurred in part because they had less time to develop their sense of self while confronted with the responsibilities of living without their partners, and also because they felt distracted and overshadowed by their husbands' circumstances and position. Renee, Maddie, and Erika discussed how their demeanors had changed:

Me personally, it has made me very tired. I just had all this grand plans. I'm gonna work out, I'm gonna lose weight. I'm gonna do this. But there's just no time. Personally, me, by the time I get my kids to bed I'm done...So just tired. I had all these plans to kind of change things within myself. Oh great, he'll be gone, when he gets back I'll have lost all the baby weight, done everything, but there's

just, there's no time. So basically just tired. You know, mentally and physically. Mentally it's gotten better (#03; 105-107, 115-118).

It's just, it's a very exhausting experience, personally. You don't smile a lot, you don't laugh a lot. I mean, you have your moments with your kids but a lot of times you're just, autopilot, you know? You tend to lose a little bit of who you are during the deployment. 'Cause you're just so focused, you don't have time for yourself...It's just, it's very time consuming, it's very exhausting and you kind of feel like a drone, a little bit (#22; 173-176, 182-183).

I find myself just going through the motions and not really, I don't know, it's hard to explain. It's like a, I can't explain it. I get up, I get dressed, I go to work, sometimes I'll go the gym, and then I'll go back to work, and then I go home and I watch TV, I fix myself dinner, I go to bed. The next day, same thing (#02; 207-211).

Heather felt her identity was torn between two worlds:

I am more frazzled, a little more disorganized thinking and stuff and it takes more to get focused on things...As for the disorganized thinking you know it's constant distraction. No matter what I'm doing there's an underlying thought of what's going on over there. So half of my mind is here, and it is 12:30 in the morning there. So I'm constantly in two different time zones; I'm wondering thinking about what he might be doing. So it's you know I try to focus on the tasks that need to be done, but most of time they don't quite make it. So, I kind of feel like that (#08; 143-144, 155-160).

And Kari expressed how it is easy for the wife's identity to get caught up in her husband's career and circumstances:

School started the next day, and I went to two classes and it was like it reminded me that I had my own identity, I wasn't just Bill's wife, or that I had ideas and thoughts and when I introduce myself, I shouldn't introduce myself as, 'My husband is deployed.' I introduce myself as my name, and what I like to do, and all that stuff... When I was getting ready to like introduce myself, I was gonna be like, '[Full Name], but I just got married, and my husband's deployed, and he's in Afghanistan, and he's a military intelligence officer,' and like, introducing [my husband] as me! By the time it got to like the middle person at the table, I was like, 'Yeah, my introduction is not gonna work 'cause it's not about me'... It's like a constant struggle and you have to find that balance. Where I feel like I just dipped really far into what [my husband] was doing. I also 'cause I like what he does. I like, it's kind of that area that I'm interested in as far as my studies, so I want to know the 15% that he can tell me 'cause it's intelligence what he's doing, and so it's interesting to me and then I start defining myself as him and not me (#14; 104-108, 248-252, 260-264).

Socially, some women also felt more withdrawn and less likely to sustain personal relationships during deployment. They did not have the time or energy to go out and socialize, especially when it involved the need to hire a babysitter and the risk of missing their husbands' calls or Internet contact. As Jenn, Erika, and Andie said,

I really just I haven't made the time to go out and find friends just for sheer fact that that means I'll be gone. Hey if I make new friends I'm going to be gone and out hanging out with them and I'm not going to be here when [my husband] gets on the computer, or I'll miss him, or I'll have to find a sitter to go out (#10; 726-730).

I am very focused on work. That's all I do. I work, I sleep. It's not fun. But, and I've become a little bit more withdrawn from my friends probably than I should have because I don't like people to see me upset (#02; 159-162).

And everyone's going out, and everyone's having fun and really like I don't think that's conducive to a long distance or deployment relationship if you're just going out to the bars and you're trying to live that lifestyle. And so for me it was definitely like a, a little bit of a change of lifestyle from the single girl to being like, kind of, I joke with my friends, I feel like a nun (#17; 60-64).

Overall, women's personal and social identities were challenged during the deployment period. A newfound sense of control, learning, and independence contributed to identity growth. Yet, constant reminders of their husbands' absence (e.g., household and parenting tasks) and the prominent focus on husbands (e.g., waiting for phone calls, thinking/worrying, emphasis from others) took away women's own sense of self.

### *Affective Experience*

As evidenced throughout the discussion of women's personal experiences with spousal deployment, military wives described a wide range of feelings and emotions experienced during the deployment period. This mixed bag of emotions and feelings not

only occurred across individuals, but also within each individual's personal experience. In other words, wives often felt excited and lonely, optimistic and depressed, and proud and resentful simultaneously, and in many combinations. Pamela said,

Crazy. I feel crazy all the time. Lonely definitely. Empowered even. Loyal. Dutiful. Um, I feel a strong sense of pride for what we're doing. Um... it's a mixed bag of emotions for sure, 'cause you know, I do feel crazy, I do feel lonely, I feel depressed, but then I think about what we're doing for this great nation and it brings me to tears. So, there are a lot of emotions that go in there... Like most of the time when something goes wrong, and it's even just a tiny thing, I get furious because I don't want to be sad about it. I don't want to be hurt, or anything else. Mad is an active emotion to me. 'Cause I can be furious, and I can scream and I can jump around in a circle, and I don't punch things because I'm not a man, but you know, you can have those physical exertions with angry, or I can, and so that's how I mean crazy (#16; 525-529; 558-563).

Maddie, and Averi further elucidated this varied affective experience:

Depression, neurotic, tendency to build up OCD, lonely, independent, um, it'll either make you or break you... You'll see what you're made of. Either you're strong or you're weak. To be strong doesn't mean that you can never cry, you know? Deployment is a whole whirlwind of emotions. I mean you're gonna have all of them, and sometimes all in one day, you know? You have to cry, you have to allow yourself to cry. It's ok to have a bad day. Tomorrow will be better. You know, it's all about perspective. If the morning started off really crappy and

you're like well today's gonna be crappy, it's gonna be crappy (#22; 402-403, 405-410).

It's funny the deployment, you have to be really strong through it. But at the same time it also gets to the weakest part of you (#18; 586-587).

### *Negative Affect*

Within this varied affective experience, all wives noted taxing emotions and feelings they had to deal with during deployment. Almost every wife mentioned loneliness or emptiness during spousal deployment. Often stemming from the loneliness they felt, the realization of their husbands' dangerous living environments, and the profound life changes they experienced while home without their husbands, most military wives also mentioned feeling depressed, sad, fearful, worried, and stressed. The doorbell and absent phone calls were often the instigators of fear and worry, as the sharp ding of the bell or the silence of the phone reminded women of the fate their husbands could meet while deployed. Although less common, some wives also reported feeling anger, resentment, grief, impatience, and craziness. Anger and resentment were directed at their husbands and/or their life circumstances. Grief, impatience, and craziness were in response to the absence of their husbands and the distraction this absence aroused. To provide a few examples of this profound and complex negative emotional experience, Riley, Anna, and Jolene said,

With that loss you have all those emotions, the sadness, the depression, the things that go along with that, even if it is temporary. I think there are lots of people that go through that. And I go through periods of depression, and I go through periods

of sadness and periods where I feel lost and unloved and lonely, lonely is huge, huge (#05; 835-839).

Oh intense loneliness. Like here's your soul mate. Well in my case, my soul mate. The person who completes me. Who else am I gonna talk about the economy or debate religious doctrine? Or no one else cares (#04; 312-314).

You walk into your house, after you just said goodbye to your husband for a year, and you walk into a year, you stare a year and the face and it's empty and it's cold, and it's lonely and it's quiet. And so, that's kind of, it's very emotional, sad (#19; 671-673).

Pamela and Maddie expressed fear and resentment:

Scared shitless is one of them for sure. I don't know if any other wife has talked to you about this. [My friend] and I have talked about it. The doorbell scares the crap out of me. If you ever go up to the house of a deployed soldier, ring the doorbell twice. Ring and knock, something like that. Don't just go ding, dong 'cause that's, that's a scary thing. Whenever they do a notification they come and they ring the doorbell (#16; 529-533).

I'm a little resentful sometimes. It's hard not to feel selfish. It's like, ok, I really wish you were home so I could go to bed, ok. I want to sleep (#22; 184-185).

The pile-up of these negative emotions likely leads to more stress and sadness, and a destructive cycle, making it essential for these women to manage their emotions. This management occurred through coping (to be discussed in the next chapter) as well as active recognition of and concentration on positive feelings.

### *Positive Affect*

Negative feelings were more salient than positive feelings in the interviews, but it is notable that the women described positive feelings during deployment. As illustrated above, oftentimes the positive feelings were mixed in with the negative feelings (i.e., both proud and lonely). Most commonly, these women discussed feeling proud of and loyal to their husbands and their husbands' military missions and duties. Some women were also active in attempting to keep a positive outlook. A positive outlook involved maintaining optimism and patience and viewing the deployment period as exciting and motivating. Heather expressed feelings of pride:

There's also a lot of pride in that sadness. There's a lot of, you know, I'm proud of what he does. And I'm proud of what our family does, and it kind of gives me a little sense of cocky, you know what I mean, that we're doing something that we believe in. And even though it hurts and it's hard, we believe in it (#08; 168-171).

Jolene and Alex illustrated how they maintained a positive attitude:

It's kind of like, 'Ok I need to get my life together,' and it's kind of motivating. You gotta get your, adjust to your new schedule and just your deployment groove is what I always call it to the people that I talk to at the FRG. Um you just get used to living, you know, it's kind of, it's almost nice... You start looking at the positives. Well at least I did, with this deployment (#19; 683-687, 690).

Optimistic or hopeful because you know that it's gonna end. It's not something that's gonna go on for ever and ever. There is, there is an end in sight. It might be years away but it is an end (#21; 390-392).

Emma felt excited about the opportunities for growth and development deployment provided:

I'm also excited because it gives us a chance to like grow in ways we might not if he was here. If you live your life the same way every single day, if you ate a bagel and cream cheese for breakfast, and if you ate a turkey sandwich for lunch, if you ate spaghetti for dinner every single day, you'll never know all the flavors that exist in the world. If you are stuck in your daily rut every single day, if you do the same things like the food example, you'll never meet new people, you never get that experience, so I don't necessarily if there's a word to describe that but the closest thing I guess I could say is excitement. You know not necessarily excitement that your husband's gone, but excitement as in you get to experience those things. You know there's a certain like unpredictable kind of like change up with things, so you're really you really are forced to adapt to situations that you might not experience in the first place (#20; 430-439).

Although some positive feelings and emotions are created by the deployment circumstances (e.g., pride, loyalty, excitement) it appears that others are more actively sought and require more optimistic viewpoints than the perhaps more naturally occurring negative emotions do. The only active attempts related to negative emotions involved trying to avoid or reframe them (rather than acquire them). On the other hand, purposefully maintaining a positive attitude, to reduce negative feelings, involved a lot of internal coaching. This avoidance of negative emotions, reframing, and emotion coaching will later be described in terms of coping strategies.

Overall, wives interpreted their personal experiences with spousal deployment as complicated, having both negative and positive effects on their sense of control, personal identity, and social identity. Furthermore, they were aware of many feelings they had experienced throughout the deployment. They were so aware of these emotions that they often tried to manipulate them, seeking a positive port in the storm of deployment. The experience of spousal deployment, from the perspective of these women, however, did not end with the self. Wives also noted changes, challenges, strains, and growth in their relationships with their husbands and their children.

#### Relational Experience

Deployment is not only experienced at a personal level. By definition deployment is taking someone, in this case a romantic partner, who was once home and placing him or her in a distant location. As such, there is a relational component to the deployment experience. Deployment altered the spousal relationship immensely, in both positive and negative ways, and these women articulated the many losses, challenges, and gains they experienced with their husbands during this unique form of separation.

#### *Relational Loss*

Most prominently, these women reported intense feelings of missing their husbands and the joy, activity, and companionship their husbands brought into their lives. They missed all the “little things” their husbands brought into the home. Put in a different way, these women felt a sense of loss without their husbands home. Specific relational losses they endured included affection, friendship, support, conversation, and shared rituals and holidays. Furthermore, the wives were affected by the losses they knew their

husbands were experiencing. They felt as though their husbands were missing out on their lives at home, and this too promoted feelings of loss and sadness for the women.

Riley reflected on the losses she experienced:

It is a loss, it's a loss of a relationship. In a sense it's a loss of time, companionship, presence, affection. Affection would be huge because yeah, you can talk all you want over the phone, but you know it's not the same as a hug. You know, so probably the loss of presence would probably sum it all up, you know, just him being there is huge, it's a huge loss. You know that it's temporary, hopefully you know, hopefully he'll come back (#05; 831-835).

Maddie and Clair discussed how it was hard knowing their husbands were missing out on life and home, and they were missing out on their husbands, too:

To me, in my eyes the hardest thing, him missing out. You know? Sure, do I miss him, as for me? Oh God yes. I miss him when I'm doing laundry cause he usually does laundry, and you know, I mean he's one of those guys that really, he's, he makes you laugh. He can always make me laugh, even when we're arguing...I miss the laughing. I mean of course we laugh but it's different with me and him. You know? Just, he's my best friend. And essentially I just miss him. It's not any one thing particular. You know? It's just, all that he encompasses and what he needs 'cause he is a very big part of this family (#22; 61-65, 69-72).

I think it's just hard because we just miss being around each other. He misses our family life here, you know, the kids playing with him and vice versa. I miss having somebody to talk to, that adult conversation...And as for me, you know, I

just I just try to keep busy and not try to think of him being gone, but there are those moments when I do think about him and wish he was here just to have somebody to talk to again. And I'm not saying I don't talk to my children, but it's just a different conversation (#11; 145-147, 150-153).

Alex and Danielle missed the "little things":

I would say just the little everyday things because it's so hard sometimes because you miss them so much and you just want them here with you. And it's hard sometimes when you go out with a group of friends and they have their boyfriends or their fiancés or their husbands there, you know, we can't do that everyday little things, like going to a movie or as silly as it sounds like cooking together, or going shopping together. It's those little things that make it extremely hard. And then it's hard too because, it's just communication. Um, yeah we can talk and we see each other and things like that, but it's not like he's standing next to me, and it's, I can't get a hug from him or I can't give him a kiss, or things like that (#21; 136-143).

And so it's really those little things. It's not having him here for that is missing. And back to our faith, when we have family prayer or when we say prayers around the table, he's not here. I mean, we take turns and he's not here, and that's what's missing. So, for me that was the most cherished thing before he left. Is that we were able to have family prayer and he led the prayer. And so it's the small things like that. That, that's what's missing. Obviously, our intimacy, yeah but, you've got kids, you know that comes and goes, it goes however your life goes.

But it's the small things, and having him here for prayers or having him here to read stories (#25; 277-283).

And finally, Shawna expected to miss her husband more on holidays, as those were special times they typically spent together:

We were always together for like important things. Birthdays and holidays, and so that'll be a big difference I think. So yeah I mean my birthday's in two weeks, and he's always been here for my birthday, so that'll be sad. But, and Christmas I think will be tough 'cause he was here for this Christmas (#15; 141-145).

Husbands brought a lot to the wives' lives, so having them gone meant missing out on a variety of events and experiences. The women deeply felt this loss of time and companionship.

### *Relational Hardship*

Beyond missing out on each other's lives, and feeling the effects of relational losses, other relational hardships occurred during deployment. Wives said that during deployment it was like their worlds were split between two places, causing partners to lose touch or feel distant from each other. This distance sometimes caused marital stress, including trust issues, financial struggles, coldness, and increased tendencies to fight and argue. Averi and Taryn felt negative relationship changes during deployment:

It's like we feel like we're two different people. We're gonna have to relearn each other. And yeah I mean, but I think, let's put it this way, it's really fragile now.

Each other as individuals, we're fragile, and so is our relationship. Whereas it was so strong when he left. Like really strong. I would've never thought about leaving

him. But I've actually thought about it with him gone...Now I'm like, hmmm, yeah we're both very fragile and so is our relationship (#18; 467-471, 475).

So, ya know, I think our relationship has just become a little bit more down and dirty as opposed to being rainbows and butterflies, ya know. It's just more of a I don't know it's just harder, ya know, because we're constantly trying to get used to something...If we get through the everything that's going on right now, I think it will be stronger, a little bit more realistic as opposed to, ya know, 'Oh I love you so much blah blah blah, this is perfect.' I think we're a little bit more realistic (#09; 182-184, 187-189).

Along with feelings of distance, Drew felt that trust was tested during deployment:

There's a lot of things that sometimes we're just like, sometimes you don't feel like you know them anymore for whatever reason, just being gone so much. There will be things that will happen or he will say something, and I'm like, 'When did that happen? I don't remember that.' It is just because we've been apart so much that you kind of lose it sometimes...They get to go to Kuwait every once in awhile and spend a weekend in Kuwait and it's almost like a resort or a club, you know, and going out. You're just kind of like, ok, I am back here and you just have to trust them. And I think sometimes that trust gets really tested and I think that when that trust gets tested that is when things get tough (#07; 201-205, 315-319).

Kari experienced more conflict with her husband:

We definitely fight a lot more. I mean not like screaming and yelling and hanging up, but like disagreements ‘cause he gets frustrated and I get frustrated and we don’t ever get frustrated at the same time, so we don’t do it together. It’s always, ‘God I’m just trying so hard and you don’t think that I’m trying hard enough.’ And it’s both, there are days he feels that way and there are days that I feel that way (#14; 277-281).

### *Relational Growth*

Although the relational experience seems grim, women also mentioned positive aspects of their relational experience during deployment. Even through difficult times, many women felt deployment was actually strengthening their relationships with their husbands, bringing them closer together. Because it was difficult to maintain a deployed relationship, they felt they put forth more effort and valued their relationships more than others and more than they had previously. During deployment, women stated marriages can either stick together or fall apart, and many felt they (and their partners) were making efforts to stick to their commitment, build trust, and continue to grow, which would contribute to their relationship endurance. In other words, deployment was a test the women felt they were passing. Some women also felt the deployment offered partners a valuable break from each other. The time apart gave them time to evaluate the relationship and recognize the appreciation they have for the relationship and each other. They stopped taking things for granted that they may have prior to the deployment. This break from each other also decreased the opportunity for fighting, as they did not have constant contact. In sum, if partners could overcome the challenge of deployment, they

were bound to be stronger and closer to each other. Pulling these relational benefits together, Heather and Frances said,

I've heard a lot of people say that deployment can make or break a relationship, and I've seen at least three break so far. But it's made us stronger. It reaffirms everything we believe about each other and about our relationship and about our love. It makes us appreciate each other much more, and it does make us both we have to work harder to understand what we're going through. Um, and we do. And I think some people don't step up to the plate on that, but we are. You know, it's hard. It's really hard. But it does make us stronger (#08; 46-53).

There are times when I think it makes it harder, but if you see the whole deployment, I think it's putting us more together. I know that a lot of relationships they break after it because of the long time, but I think if your relationship is working it's even going to make it really good. So for us, it's not gonna change everything. We're fine. It's hard, of course it is, but it's still going to be the same relationship when he gets back...It's gonna make us closer...I think because you see how much you appreciate each other. Yeah. I think most people forget what they have (#12; 108-112, 114, 258-259).

Riley and Alex said,

It was one of those, you never know what you have 'til you have to go without out, type situations. So I mean, it really made us stop taking a lot of things for granted. It just was a good experience all around. It kind of turned ugly towards the end because civil war broke out and he went, he was listed at as MIA for six

weeks... That right there was a pretty big turning point to the point where it was you never know how much you actually love someone and how much you're actually gonna miss them and things like that 'til you start thinking about, 'Oh my gosh. Is he alive, is he dead? Is he being held captive some place?' So that was scary... Yeah it was pretty intense and it kind of changed both of us for the better. We stopped taking so many of the little things for granted (#21; 80-84, 102-105, 107-108).

I also think that when we get a break from each other we also have time to evaluate ourselves, where we're at in the relationship, where we'd like to take the relationship... I also feel that we don't fight as much when we're separated because well obviously the contact there isn't as often as it would be when he's home (#05; 177-178; 182-184).

Even Averi, who was experiencing turbulence in her relationship at the time of the interview, expressed that the deployment would eventually have a positive influence on her relationship:

I think if we work it out when he comes home. Or when we work it out, maybe I should be a little more positive. You can tell I'm pretty bitter and angry. I, um, I think it'll make our relationship a lot stronger. It will bring us closer together. It will have brought us closer together, the deployment... Because we will have overcome and all the underlying issues that have come out, you know?... The deployment has revealed a lot about who we are as individuals and what foundation our relationship is based on (#18; 603-606, 608-609, 611-612).

So while wives missed their husbands and experienced a sense of loss and hardship during deployment, they also believed deployment offered a space for relational growth and appreciation. This relational experience mirrors the women's personal experience in that both negative and positive aspects of deployment were realized and/or interpreted.

### Family Experience

In addition to the personal and relational deployment experiences of these women, the mothers in the group also discussed changes and challenges within the family relationships, especially their own relationships with their children. Women knew they were not the only members of the family affected by the deployment. As noted, they understood that leaving home and missing out on family life affected their husbands. Fathers were not around for kids' basketball games, first words, first steps, or other developmental events; they also missed everyday life, tantrums, and choices. This absence created a gap in the family time and structure, which mothers felt influenced the children and family relationships. The mothers talked about how the deployment, and absence of the father, affected children's adjustment as well as their own parenting and engagement with their children. Additionally, they felt their own feelings during deployment could negatively impact their children through emotional contagion.

### *Child Reactions and Adjustment*

Mothers noted varied attitudes from their children: one cried at the door waiting for dad to come home and another acted like nothing was different, one tried to pack herself in daddy's bag hoping to go away with him, and another brushed the goodbye off

by going outside to play. These different reactions happened across families, but also within families when there were multiple children. These varied responses made the family deployment experience very complicated for many mothers, as they had to then react uniquely to each child. And the reactions did not end when dad left. Many mothers felt their children had trouble adjusting to the separation from their fathers and from military life. Adjustment difficulties were shown through behavioral and psychological problems at home and at school. Jolene and Drew discussed some of the reactions and adjustment problems they noticed in their kids:

The day that he left, my daughter I guess thought that she was going with him. And I should've known because when he brought home this big tough tote container to pack with his things, it was in the living room, and she crawled in and closed it just enough so that I could see her eye, and I asked her what she was doing. And she said, 'Shhh, mommy I'm going to Afghanistan with my Daddy.' And I explained to her she wasn't. But I don't, I don't think that she caught on. But the day that he left, he knelt down to give her a hug and kiss goodbye and she just started crying, just hysterically, and she was saying, 'No daddy, no, please don't leave me. Take me with you. Can I go with you?' (#19; 235-243).

I think it's been difficult for [my son] but I think moreso just the adjustment, you know, adjusting to new school and new friends and, you know, not always understanding why we have to move or leave and when we're going (#07; 123-125).

Taryn noted the variation she saw in each of her children's reactions:

Every time he leaves, it's terrible, it's major drama every time that he leaves. And she I think is definitely being affected psychologically by the all the coming and going. It's really starting I think to affect her personality overall. But you know she it's the crying and the major problems for a couple weeks before she eases into a normal routine with just us. With [Name], my son, he's bummed out, but kinda like uh, this really sucks but life goes on type thing. And [my daughter] acts like she couldn't care less (#09; 64-69).

Beyond children's negative reactions and difficulty adjusting, and likely in response to these issues, women noted changes in their mother-child relationships and parenting styles.

### *Relationships and Parenting*

#### *Decreased Relationship Quality*

When discussing relationships with their kids, some mothers felt like during deployment they were less engaged. Their own lack of time led them to limit the quality one-on-one time they spent with their kids. This left the kids to spend more time on their own, without their mothers' constant attention. As Renee and Heather stated,

So parenting wise, I just have to maybe let them do their own thing more 'cause I have so much going on... There is not as much one-on-one hands on, it's more of, just a broad... I guess I have to look at overall as opposed to individual 'cause I have both of them, and I have to do it all. I guess that's it. There is not as much individual attention. So I've just had to kind of just make sure everybody's fed, don't kill each other. Try to give them a little time... I just I have to look more at

the big picture than minute by minute. So that's where it's changed. 'Cause I like to get more involved with them but there's just, and especially with my older one, if I sit down with my younger one, the older one is just right there. So, there is just not a lot of time for that individual attention as far as parenting goes (#03; 130-131, 133-137, 139-142).

Like this morning she ate a banana and cereal for breakfast, out of a cup. You know, we didn't sit down to eat together. And that's something that's, ya know, sitting down to eat together is very important to me, but when they're not here it's more difficult to do that. So she ends up eating alone a lot of times or I'll eat after they go to bed and stuff. I don't think that's a very good thing for her (#08; 563-568).

Most women who noted this loss of quality time and engagement felt a sense of guilt or sadness about not putting their kids at the top of the priority list because they knew the kids were also missing their fathers. Many wanted to make changes to this aspect of their parenting during deployment. Yet, living temporarily as single mothers, they also felt they were doing what they could given their circumstances. Jolene expressed,

And I'm so busy with cooking and cleaning and outdoor stuff and school, FRG stuff, I don't have time. And I know that sounds really horrible because your child should be your priority and she really, honestly, hasn't been my priority. She's been taken care of and bathed and fed, and you know, but I don't take the time that I want to. I haven't taken the time that I've wanted to take with her to do things like, go to the park everyday, or sit down and play a board game with her. I

just don't have time... Throughout the day it's always, 'Come on [Name], let's go, come on, we have to go, we're late. Come on. Get your shoes on. Let's go, we're late.' And I hate feeling like I'm pushing her throughout the day, just pushing her to get the day over with, but I am, and I don't know really what else to do (#19; 382-387, 410-413).

How women managed the tensions involved with their lack of time and diminished mother-child relationship quality will be further discussed in terms of family coping.

### *Discipline and Nurture Challenges*

Without their husbands around, these women also experienced parenting challenges in terms of both disciplining and nurturing their children. They had become single moms, so they no longer had their husbands' helpful backup and complementary actions. Mothers sometimes felt their husbands offered a different role for the kids; they played, they talked about cars, they punished. Many mothers found it challenging to take on both their own and their husbands' roles as parents, and they noted changes they felt in their own parenting during deployment. Emphasizing these changes and challenges, and the need to balance "mother" and "father" roles, Maddie and Drew said,

It's a hard balance. It's a very hard balance: disciplinary, nurture, all of the above. It's just with my son, I do find myself having a little bit of a short fuse. Um, just getting agitated, you know, 'cause he's nine years old. There's certain things, come on, a nine year old should just know... I don't know about all the new stuff nowadays, so it's hard being a mom to a boy, trying to raise a man. You know, it's just frustrating. And for him it's frustrating 'cause I don't get it. 'Cause I

mean sometimes when he's talking to me about cars and like the systems of the cars my eyes just glaze over, you know? He's like, 'Mom did you hear me?' 'Yeah.' 'No you didn't.' I'm like, 'Baby I am sorry,' you know? I can't always be there for him in the way that a daddy could. I try, but there's only so much I can do (#22; 206-209, 347-353).

Sometimes I get so frustrated because I am just like, you know, I feel bad for him because if my husband was here he probably wouldn't be doing some of those things. You know, some of his things he acts out on I know he wouldn't do if my husband was here, but he kind of takes advantage of that. And I am like, I have a hard time trying to balance how to discipline him. And I am not as stern as my husband is. My husband would probably be like, 'Do some pushups,' and I'm like I'm not that person, you know, and so that is tough (#07; 783-788).

Taryn noted changes in her parenting style,

I don't mess around, ya know, 'cause with dealing with the kids and everything, I'm a totally different mom when he's gone that I am when he's home. When he's gone, I'm, 'Do what you're told and you do it now because I'm not playing games!' And when he's home I'm definitely more lenient... 'Cause he's my back up, ya know what I mean? Like if I tell somebody to do something and they don't listen, well then dad steps in and they're really in trouble. But ya know when he's gone he's not there to step in, so I have to immediately just take over that role (#9; 122-125, 127-129).

### *Emotional Contagion*

In addition to the changes they experienced with their parenting and mother-child relationships, these moms also felt their own experience could negatively impact their children. They presumed their kids could sense their frustration and stress because they could never hide it all, even if they tried. Although many did not want their kids to sense their negative emotions, as they too might become agitated, the kids were sometimes able to comfort their moms when they sensed their sadness or stress. Renee and Emma perceived this emotional contagion:

At the beginning I think they sensed it was a little weird 'cause I was really stressed out as far as trying to get this routine started. Bedtime, I lost my temper with Cash a few times at bedtime...And I know he sensed like, 'Yeah mom's, gosh, she's lost her mind.' But I think once we got into, my kids for whatever reason other than you know, when I have them on this is the time we nap, this is what time, they are very adaptable for the most part, which is nice (#03; 370-372, 376-379).

This one I wanted to be really involved, I wanted to stay positive, and not just for me but for my daughter. You know, if I'm lonely and if I'm sad and depressed all the time that's not good for her. The care that she receives won't be the best, and that's going to rub off on her too; she's gonna be sad and morose all the time. So now it's not an option for me, and it's almost because my daughter is here and I obviously didn't have her before. She gives me strength because I have to be her rock. You know, I have to be there for her (#20; 470-476).

While discussing emotional contagion, Maddie and Kristin also reported positive reactions they received from their kids:

Kids always notice. That's why they say you should never fight in front of your kids. Because the vibes, the energy that your fight gives off, goes into them, and then, yeah, so they know. They can tell. [My daughter] is really loving, when I'm just kind of, she comes out gives me kisses, 'Hi, hi!', you know, gives me hugs and she lays her head down on my lap, 'Awww.' You know, simple things like that. My son will come around and, 'I love you mom'...Just simple things. But you gotta try to be upbeat cause they do feed off your energy. If you are frustrated, they're gonna be frustrated. If you're pissy, they're gonna be pissy. You know, if you're happy, it trickles down. Sometimes you just can't help it (#22; 1004-1009, 1012-1014).

I think they know that I'm stressed out all the time. And they know like... I had some really bad days at school. And I would just, didn't want to go to school, and I'd get in the car and I'd cry and they'd hug me, 'It's ok mommy we love you.' I take everything to heart, and I cry a lot more, and I think that affects them because they don't want to see me upset. And I'm also, I don't have a lot of downtime, I'm like come on come on, come on, but they get kind of agitated too that I'm kind of stressed out (#6, 621-626).

With fathers gone, emotions heightened, patience challenged, and quality time limited, mothers felt many changes in their own parenting and relationships with their kids. In many cases, these changes caused strain because mothers felt they could not fix

their children's problems or make them feel better. Dad was gone. They could not change that. However, the efforts they made to help children adjust and to manage family relationships become very clear in the discussion of family coping.

### Experience Summary

When discussing their experiences with deployment, women articulated the ways they felt deployment had affected their personal, relational, and family lives. In talking with them, it was clear that they had thought a lot about these issues. Many had previously reflected on the benefits and challenges of deployment when making decisions about whether or not their husbands should re-enlist in the military, for example, and most were acutely aware of the changes they had made as individuals, as spouses, and as mothers. They had created and continued to create subjective meaning of the objective experience of deployment, and this meaning making was apparent throughout the interviews and their reported perceptions of their experiences (e.g., interpreting emotions, thinking about deployment as a relationship test), coping behaviors, and support. Throughout the interviews, however, a few broader discursive meaning-making moves also became apparent as these women discussed their deployment experiences. I will briefly discuss two main discursive meaning making moves that emerged from the discussions.

### Discursive Meaning Making Moves

#### *Could be Worse*

First, and most commonly, during the interviews all women made comparisons between their own situation and other possible scenarios. Often, when reflecting on their

own challenges or negative experiences, women would refer to a worst-case scenario or a more traumatic story from a friend or acquaintance. More specifically, these women compared themselves and their deployment experience to other people, other situations, and other job positions. There is an underlying sense that women recognize their lives could be worse, depending on these various factors. Pamela and Riley compared themselves to other women who were not handling the deployment well or that were faced with more difficult circumstances:

I think, a lot of times, ‘Am I really handling this well?’ And then I look at other wives, especially in our section, there’s a lot of us, you know, and I see how they deal with it, and I’m like, because I heard a rumor and I don’t know how true it is, but I heard the girl in [apartment] number one, when her husband deployed she stayed inside for two weeks and didn’t come outside. I’m thinking, ‘Ok, I am not doing that’ (#16; 1106-1110).

I have two sister-in-laws that have either endured some type of separation, and/or deployment with children, which I bow down to because I could not, it’s hard enough for me to keep myself sane, but much less care for babies, or children, you know? I just, I’m like, ‘Wow!’ I’m just one of those, like, I’m sure I could do it if I had to, but I can’t imagine myself doing that (#05; 536-540).

Drew, Anette, and Renee felt they didn’t have it as bad as they could based on their husbands’ locations and/or jobs:

I’m thankful he’s in Iraq and not Afghanistan, that’s one thing I am thankful for. I think deployments are different now from when he first went to Iraq. He deployed

with [Unit] right after the war first broke out. So he was one of the first ones over there right after the Marines went in. Things are a lot different now with deployments than they used to be. Now over there he's got a barracks room, and he's got an actual place. The first time he went over it was like they were pitching tents and sleeping in the old palaces and old places that had been converted into makeshift living spaces. After they had bombed it, they went in and lived there. So, you know, it's a lot different now because before you spent a lot of time going, 'Oh God I haven't heard from him in a week,' ya know, 'what's wrong?' And now they pretty much have internet and have mail, and usually I don't get to talk to him everyday, but he usually pops up on the internet or sends me an email every couple days or something. So, it's not as worrisome as before (#07; 49-60). My husband and I don't really have it bad because I know he's sitting at a desk everyday, and he's coming to his room and then I get to talk to him. Other people don't have that; they go on missions and don't hear from each other for weeks, and they don't know what's going on (#13; 480-483). I guess just because what his job is, that's just not really not something that I, you know, if he was out there, you know patrolling, then that I suppose I would be a lot more concerned (#03; 293-295).

### *Part of the Job*

Beyond comparing themselves and their situations to others, women made attributions regarding why they were in their current circumstances. Many noted that being a part of the military was a choice, so they had to live with the fact that deployment

was a part of that life. They discussed feelings of obligation, duty, and beliefs to justify going through deployment, which also illustrated the values of the culture in which they became involved. Some stated that deployment was not the goal when entering the military, but they tended to recognize it as part of the job, especially once the country entered into combat. Recognizing deployment as a duty, obligation, and opportunity for their husbands seemed to add a sense of control to an otherwise uncertain and uncontrollable situation. For example, Anna, Stacey, and Taryn said,

Really just, I'm used to it. You know, I'm ok. You know, it's what I signed on for. It's what I was getting into as an Army wife...I am an Army wife, so it's not like I didn't expect him to get deployed, so it could be worse (#04; 83-84, 98-99). I think a lot of people are like, 'Oh my god they're taking my husband from me!' And it's like, 'Look, he's military, you knew that,' you know? It's part of his job (#24; 235-237).

He tends to blame it on himself for his choice in his career. But you know he didn't know when he joined the military; he joined the military before this whole conflict even started. At that time we were very, you know, stable as a country. The military wasn't out doing things...I don't think there's any way that anybody could have predicted that we would be where we are right now. Ya know, back when he joined the military (#09; 957-960,962-964).

Drew and Kristin further illustrated this form of meaning making:

It's just the way I at least look at it, it's part of the job. I know there's people that try to fight and get out of going. My husband and I have always said, 'It's the

military; it's part of the job.' He's been in since, if you count since the Marines, he's been in since 1996, and um you know it just goes with the territory (#07; 145-148).

When I thought he wasn't going, I was kind of disappointed that he would miss out, you know, recruiting duty's three years, and he would've missed out on probably two deployments and it's his duty, I mean he feels like he should be over there. He misses us, we miss him. And I feel like he should be over there too because someone has to do it, and I'd rather him do it and have me here than have someone else do it whose wife couldn't handle it, or something like that...I mean it's not ideal, I wish he was here all the time, but I do, I feel like he has an obligation and he does too. So it makes it a little easier I guess to process (#06; 84-88; 97-98).

Meaning making can be seen through all of the responses these women gave regarding their experiences, as well as within coping and support, but comparing to others and viewing deployment as part of the job were two discursive moves women consistently made when discussing their feelings and experiences with spousal deployment.

## CHAPTER FIVE: PERSONAL, RELATIONAL, AND FAMILY COPING PROCESSES

The experience of military wives is intense, varied, and ripe for causing problems as well as eliciting proactive responses. Faced with the ups and downs of deployment, and diverse experiences, these women are faced with a choice, as Makenna concluded,

My philosophy tends to be you know about deployments and about military in general, you've got two choices: you can freak out or deal with it. And sometimes you freak out a little bit anyway, but as long as you get to the deal with it part, then it's ok. It's if you spend your whole time freaking out and worrying and stressing out you're just going to make yourself worry and sick (#01; 31-35).

In the midst of a life interrupted by deployment, most women found coping mechanisms and supportive resources that were allowing them to do the latter—deal with it. They found ways to overcome, or at least live with, the changes and challenges they faced. The other choice—freaking out—was just not possible, as they had lives to live and families to sustain.

When asked how they were dealing with deployment, some women said they “just do it” or “suck it up,” but all the wives (even those who made these simple assertions) discussed a variety of more active coping strategies they used. Based on the aforementioned results regarding the perceived experience of spousal deployment, it became clear that the women's deployment experiences were centered not only in the individual, but also in the relationship and the family. Paralleling these perceptions of the experience, wives noted personal, relational, and familial coping strategies they used to

get through the deployment period. Again, the results will be organized based on these three types, or contexts for, coping. Within each section, themes and sub-themes will be discussed. For some more complex themes, sub-themes will be further delineated by the functions they serve. These types of strategies are not mutually exclusive, as most women reported enacting a variety of strategies to cope with the various challenges with which they were confronted.

### Personal coping

Women enacted various personal coping strategies to help them deal with the strains they associated with deployment. These personal coping strategies can in some cases be tied to women's perceptions of the demands of their personal deployment experiences (e.g., control challenges, identity struggles, and negative affect), but they also include mechanisms for coping with relational challenges (e.g., relational losses and hardships) because these changes also often impacted their personal experience.

### *Keeping Busy*

It is not surprising that women highlighted how busy they felt when discussing their deployment experiences because keeping busy and finding ways to distract themselves were among the most common coping strategies. Many mentioned that keeping busy helped them avoid sitting around moping, waiting for their husbands to call, and thinking about the deployment. Although this avoidance was discussed as a by-product of keeping busy, it was another valuable way of coping. Sitting and worrying only caused more strain, so women sought out things to do to keep their minds off the

deployment. Maddie and Frances discussed how keeping busy helps them avoid worrying about the deployment:

‘Cause there’s that little added fear. ‘Cause even though he’s in a safe place and his job is safe, there’s always that possibility, always, that something will happen... There’s always that possibility, and that’s why you’re always on edge. You kind of like always have to be on, just try and keep yourself busy to keep from thinking all that stuff because if you just sit down and think about it all the time, oh my God, it’ll eat you alive. You’ll turn into a basket case, and that’s so not where I want to be (#22; 967-968, 970-973).

I always hear you should try to keep yourself busy. That’s what I hear from the most people... Trying to keep busy is the most important thing for myself... It helps, yeah, because you cannot worry that much; you cannot think about it non-stop. It helps (#12; 189-191, 199-200).

Alex and Shawna noted ways in which they distract themselves:

I try to keep extremely busy, though. Whether it’s doing schoolwork, or it’s going the gym and working out, or something along those lines because it’s when you sit around and you actually think about him not being there that it really hits you. After three years I’ve kind of gotten used to it, but after he was first deployed, that was the big thing, just staying busy (#21; 169-173).

I like relaxing and not thinking about things. Watching silly TV shows and movies and going out to eat with [friends] and you know doing things that just

make me feel good, so that I'm not, you know, constantly thinking about sad things. And you know treating myself to presents (#15; 245-248).

### *Healthy Behaviors*

Another coping strategy, which might contribute to attempts to keep busy, involved engaging in healthy behaviors. Women discussed trying to avoid temptations and distance themselves from unhelpful people and situations. They also participated in a variety of helpful behaviors, such as going to the gym and eating well, writing down feelings, and setting goals. The women felt they needed to make good decisions in order to protect themselves and their relationships, but these behaviors also helped them work through their feelings and emotions. Emma and Makenna discussed making healthy choices regarding their social lives and networks:

So you also have to, I don't go out partying, I've got a daughter, and I really don't really like the party scene anyway, but you have to be careful with who you hang out with because you could be guilty by association. So you just have to just engage in healthy behaviors... You still have to be very healthy and aware of what your decisions are and the impact that they'll have on other people, including your family and your soldier (#20; 536-539, 553-554).

Again for me kind of my trying to find a safe place to hang out. I don't wanna be in a bad; ya know, I don't want to put myself in a situation where something would happen. So I make a point to try to find safer places (#01; 168-171).

Erika illustrated how going to the gym can help:

And then I also have the gym. I have found that if I am ever really upset of missing him or hear something on the news about North Korea being mean to South Korea again or whatever, I just go workout. And, it is not necessarily good for my body the next day, but the mental aspect of it is great. I have taken up a pi-yo class, so it's a little bit of Pilates, a little bit of yoga, and that has been the best thing for me. And that helps tremendously (#02; 354-358).

Britney and Anna discussed writing as a coping strategy:

Well I do have a blog that I write on, that's about, you know, the whole deployment, and I started it when he left. So I do use that I guess as a tool to sometimes vent frustrations and just kind of, I don't know, just this is how the day was, and you know, get it off my mind (#23; 600-602).

I keep a diary. I do; I keep a diary and put all these terrible thoughts on my terrible days, and the crazy happy thoughts. The deliriously happy thoughts. Like the first phone call you get after he's deployed, you're deliriously happy...I don't see the point in keeping it bottled up, I'd rather just write it down (#04; 359-361, 363-364).

Andie clarified how developing goals helped her cope with deployment:

I think it helps to have a lot of goals and to be moving forward because you're, you see the light at the end of the tunnel, or you have some goals, so by the time he gets home, you know, by the time he gets home, when he gets home, I'm gonna look like this, I'm gonna be ten pounds less, when he gets home I'm gonna be able to do real pushups, when he gets home, like, and I've actually done

that...If I was doing the same thing everyday I'd be so much more crazy. But, just knowing I'm moving forward and things are changing, and I've got these goals, um, but I think, for me I got really into my fitness, and my fitness goals. And it gives us something to talk about and it also gives me something to, to, to like look forward to and to like, you know. It makes time go by a lot faster...Part of the thing of the diet and fitness I think is like a sense of control (#17; 280-284, 286-290, 303).

Engaging in healthy behaviors in some instances offered an outlet for expressing negative emotions and reframing the deployment experience. It also seems to offer women something they can control in an often-uncontrollable situation. They can take control of their fitness, behaviors, and set of friends, and they do so in order to maintain personal and relational health.

### *Seeking Support*

#### *Network Support*

Although the women described support in much greater detail, which will be discussed in the next chapter, it should be noted that women often reported staying social or talking to people and seeking support from friends, family, and husbands as a prominent coping strategy for dealing with deployment. In other words, although support was a topic planned for the interviews, seeking support emerged as a coping strategy before women were explicitly asked to talk about the support they were receiving. Clair emphasized the importance of seeking support and help when it is needed:

So I'm having to rely on other people, so I'm having to get over that you know feeling of you know not wanting to bother people or not having to ask for help because I need help. And so if I need the help, I need to ask for it, and allow people to help me. I am slowly but surely getting over it because like I said I don't want to bother people or I just don't wanna feel like you know I'm taking advantage of them. But at the same time I'm not. I'm just saying, 'Hey this is my situation right now, and I need you. Can you help?' (#11; 193-198).

Makenna, Drew, and Maddie highlighted the importance of developing and sustaining a social network:

That's why it's important to find those connections and make those friendships. You don't want to do this by yourself if you can help it... A lot of it's making your own communities. You have to. Whether it's a bible study or a church group or other friends you've made. You have to learn to make your own communities (#01; 238-239, 1143-1145).

What works for me is I try to find a support group and try to find friends. When I moved here I joined a mom's group...really you just to have, build yourself a support, it's the way to deal with it (#07; 499-500; 502).

A few good friends is all you need. I like self-sustaining friends, as I call them. Not a lot of drama. You don't have to talk to them everyday, you don't have to see them everyday. But when they need you, you're there. When you need them, they're there. You know, surround yourself with good people. Make good choices, don't be stupid (#22; 428-431).

### *Affection*

More specifically, and based on the felt loss of affection that women discussed as part of their relational experience, some women noted seeking affection as a type of support. This affection came from children, friends, family, pets, and even stuffed animals. Stacey and Makenna noted how seeking affection, even from inanimate objects, helped them feel better:

It was funny cause my sister came to visit and I hugged her. I'm like, 'It feels good to hug again.' She's like, 'Oh?' I'm like, 'I don't touch people. I don't have any interaction'...I just need to hug someone. But now that I have a lot more friends, and the kids practically trample on me and they hug me every 10 seconds, it's like, 'Oh, well ok this is good.' But it's weird how much you need like, interaction, like physical hug or something (#24; 327-328. 331-334).

There was this sappy country song, and I just started crying in the middle of the grocery store. I just needed a hug. And this is going to sound bad, but I actually walked over to the stuffed animals and bought a stuffed cat. I just needed something to hold, and it sounds really pathetic, but I did (#01; 970-973).

Seeking support from others, in many forms, was one of the most prominent coping strategies women introduced. The support, and other responses, they received from others will be discussed in the next chapter.

### *Emotion Coaching*

In addition to behavioral and communicative coping strategies (e.g., keeping busy, healthy behaviors, and seeking support), these women tried to make psychological

shifts to help ease the hardships of deployment. Involving a high level of cognitive complexity, women used emotion coaching strategies. Some results of this emotion coaching exercise were illustrated above in the women's positive affective experience. However, the process of maintaining a positive attitude, and accepting and redirecting negative thoughts and emotions, was very commonly emphasized as a helpful way of coping with deployment.

### *Process and Function*

Emotion coaching involved positive self-talk, including finding personal strengths and positive emotions. It also involved redirecting feelings of weakness and negative emotions. Sometimes women needed to recognize their own feelings and limitations and slow down to breathe during the deployment in order to make it through. In other cases, keeping busy and participating in new activities helped women reframe their negative experiences. Women's descriptions illuminated the emotions they needed to confront and redirect, as well as the overall process and result of emotion coaching. Averi said,

My imagination just runs wild. So it's just kind of taming that imagination, just believing everything's gonna be ok. But there's just a lot of emotional coaching involved in him being in Iraq. Emotional coaching for myself...When he left, it was that fear that he wouldn't come home, which was, you know, me telling myself, 'He's gonna be fine, he's gonna be fine.' Like I would seriously have to tell myself that 20,30,40 times until I believed it. I guess just allowing myself to not feel like I need his phone call because I couldn't rely on it. This was in the beginning. Like, allowing myself to just, helping myself to just rely on myself

more, you know? Rely less on him... Then right now it's just like, not allowing, for the past couple of months, like not allowing myself to give up. You know? And then also try to find a middle ground between not being too cold with him, but also being supportive, 'cause that's my obligation. I kind of don't want to be supportive. I'm kind of angry and spiteful, you know? But just like trying to find the middle ground, you know? And then it comes back to allowing myself to be weak, to acknowledge what I'm going through (#18; 310-312, 560-564, 569-574).

Averi's description showed how emotion coaching could take various forms, especially over time. She coached herself in the beginning to manage feelings of uncertainty and fear. Then, in the end when the deployment had begun to drive a wedge into her relationship, she had to coach herself not to give up or take her frustrations out on her husband. She also discussed how she needed to remain hopeful that her relationship would withstand the challenges of deployment in the end.

Many other women also illustrated the process and function of emotion coaching as a coping strategy. Kari and Riley stated,

It's challenged me to just be more patient, and I'm not. And I talked about it earlier about being patient and realizing that I don't have control of everything. And being positive when I don't feel like it, when I don't feel like... I always say, 'I don't feel like shining sunshine out of my ass today, but I have to.' Because I can't like there are some days I break down, but I really try to make it through the whole week without being negative, and I usually make it until like Saturday and then I'm just like, 'God this sucks! And I'm pissed! And I hate it!'... Just being

aware of how you're feeling and forcing yourself to confront it. The thing I guess I hate worst is like denial where you just don't recognize that you're feeling bad. Like, my grandma calls them pity parties. She's like, 'If you're feeling like shit today, have yourself a pity party, invite people, don't invite people, just you know it's like you throw yourself a party. You get ready for it, you have it, and it's over, and then you move on'...But what Petraeus said was, in the book, and he kept repeating it was, 'Embrace the suck. Embrace the suck. It's going to suck, embrace it.' And that's what I think to myself on the really bad days, 'Embrace the suck, I can do this, just take it and hug it and don't let go of it' 'cause it's like that whole idea of like kill it with kindness. Embrace it 'cause it's just gonna suck (#14; 216-221, 390-395, 791-795).

You gotta focus on the strengths. You know, so you start looking at life, 'Well, [Name], you know what, you're healthy right now and you're not in any pain and you know what? [Husband] has provided a really great house for you and two wonderful dogs that love you to death. If you're so bad, go for a run or something. It's a beautiful day outside. It could be worse. Life could be a lot worse. Your husband could be dead, and he's not, he's over there doing a great job.' So, it's like, oh yeah, it's a lot of self-convincing sometimes when you don't have those people right at your fingertips to lift you up (#05; 435-438, 440-442).

Makenna and Pamela also showed how emotion coaching helped them get through the trials of deployment:

Sometimes you just take a deep breath is all you need to do. It's ok. Ya know, if I haven't heard from him in a couple days, we usually talk online almost every day, but if he's gone back from his R&R, he won't be able to do that for one reason or another. So it's, 'Ok, it's the military, things happen, he's either got watch or he's busy. It doesn't always work out that I can talk to him.' I just have to remember that. It doesn't mean anything is wrong...I know for me I try to put a happy face on things in general, but there's times when I just outright have a breakdown and bawl. And that's ok. Sometimes you need to do that. I tend to try to not do that, and I've had to learn that it's ok for me to do that because I want to be the strong woman but sometimes you just gotta cry (#01; 37-41, 374-378).

I don't look at the deployment as, 'Oh my God, he's missing this, and he's missing that, and he didn't get to go to this and we're not getting to do this together,' and you know, 'We didn't have our second Christmas together,' or, you know, 'We had Christmas at Thanksgiving,' and da, da, da, da, da. You can't think about those things. You think about the better things. You think, 'Ok for the next deployment that rolls around I am gonna be better prepared for it.' You know, 'Hey I learned how to cook for one. I'm figuring out what I need to do to make the next deployment easier' (#16; 602-608).

### *Flexibility*

More specifically in terms of emotion coaching, women noted their attempts to become more flexible and open to new things, especially since they often lacked control

in making larger life decisions. Many women attempted to embrace flexibility since the lack of control could be overwhelming. As Makenna and Loren stated,

The joke is to be like Gumby, always flexible. That is the wife's motto. We didn't know where we were going to be. And people ask how do you deal with it? And you just do. You just do. You don't know where you are going to go. You don't know what is going to happen. You just, like I said, we are both pretty pragmatic, realistic people, so it's, 'Ok I have no idea where we'll be living in the next two months, but we'll figure it out' (#01; 615-619).

You need to be flexible and open because you have a lack of control, you both do. You can't make it stop (#00; 91).

To summarize, the goal behind emotion coaching, to temper the negative or turn the negative into positive, helps further illustrate the potentially damaging nature of deployment as well as the strength and motivation of these women to not allow deployment to get the best of them and their relationships.

#### *Personal Coping Summary*

Overall, these women found both the behavioral and cognitive coping strategies, including keeping busy, participating in healthy behaviors, seeking support, and emotion coaching, helpful during spousal deployment. And, as signified by Riley, all women reported using multiple strategies; each helping in the various ways outlined above:

One of my strategies is to stay busy. If I'm just sitting idle for any length of time, you start to wonder, you start dreaming up stuff. I do, I start to dream up stuff, you know, I haven't heard from him for three hours, what's going on? So I stay

busy with either work or school. I end up; I talk to my family and friends a lot more on the telephone 'cause I don't have any local. Just for human contact, or human conversation...If I'm really having a hard time with emotions or deployment, I try to share those with my husband. He's a very big source of comfort for me, and so a lot of times he might be feeling the same things, so you kinda feel like you have a support system (#05; 380-384, 388-390).

These coping strategies were all helpful for women in coping with their experiences. However, their experiences with deployment extended beyond the self, so they also found and utilized coping strategies that helped them maintain relational and familial resilience, or sustain a balance between their relationship and family demands and capabilities during deployment. Relational and family coping strategies can be further distinguished from personal coping strategies (which in some cases also attended to relational or family needs) because women involved their husbands and children in these processes.

### Relational Coping

Relational coping strategies, including strategies for connecting, coping with difficult decisions about communication, and maintaining positive relationship qualities, were enacted between spouses. In other words, wives discussed relational coping strategies in terms of both their own and their husbands' behaviors and responses to deployment demands.

### *Connecting via Communication Media*

Technology was very instrumental in helping partners stay connected in each other's lives during deployment. The main channels for communication involved the

telephone and Internet. Technology was used to send emails, instant messages, pictures, and videos. Wives also reported blogging as a way of sharing feelings and information with their husbands. However, even with advances in technology, some women valued letter writing as a source for communication. Although less common, they talked about using “snail mail” for sending notes, pictures, and videos. Letter writers felt it was an important way to show love and cope with the distance deployment caused. Kristin and Andie discussed the benefits of technology as way to connect:

Just the day-to-day stuff, which is why I really started blogging because it was like all the things that I don't think to tell him when he calls I could put on there, and he'll hear the funny stories, because a lot of the stuff he misses out on 'cause I don't have time, with three kids, to sit down and write a letter every night (#06; 66-69).

We talk, I mean probably more than a lot of people you've interviewed; we're able to communicate a lot and so hours everyday. And we know everything about each other because if all you have for a relationship is over the phone, I mean, I've asked him every question on every survey I could find. We've taken like every premarital exam, you know, I feel like, 'cause it is a new way to get to know somebody when it is like, all over the phone, you know. You have to find things to talk about and we never run out of things to talk about so it's good (#17; 116-121).

Although they also used technology, Makenna and Shawna felt letters were also an important way to connect:

Talking online is a great thing, thank God for technology, but writing letters is really important too because there's the value in having something in your hands. And I've been kind of bad about that since he left. I wrote a little last night to him. I learned the value of keeping those other communications open, not just the online and just the occasional phone call, but having something tangible. That's really important, especially for them. It's important to me too, but it is more important to them there (#1; 54-59).

I think letters are a good way to keep romance going and that's definitely important 'cause when you're not here to like, you know, physically be next to some one I think that's something that could definitely get lost...It's romantic and old school, so, but just in general keep thinking of the reasons you are in love because that will keep romance and romantic feelings alive (#15; 659-662, 664-666).

The ability to communicate, especially through the Internet and telephone access, was highly valued and instrumental in the relational coping process. However, it did not come without challenges.

#### *Open Versus Restricted Communication*

Perhaps most unique relational coping strategy involved communication choices and considerations spouses made during the deployment. Because the deployment period was wrought with challenges and negative emotions, for both partners, women felt they had to make strategic choices with their husbands about what they would and would not communicate with each other. These choices were sometimes internal, where spouses

thought before they communicated with each other about their experiences at home or away or retrospectively about why they did or did not want to communicate openly during deployment. Communication considerations and struggles were also sometimes shared and discussed between each other or through advice from others. Britney illustrated the implicit communication struggle:

I kind of struggle with that one because sometimes I don't know if I should say something like, 'I'm having a really tough day. I really wish you were here to take the load off,' you know, that type of thing, because I don't want him to feel like I'm having a really tough time. I don't want him to feel guilty for not being here. I want him to feel like he's, you know, that I'm proud of him 'cause I am... So, sometimes I go back and forth about should I tell him about today, should I just give him the easy version?... And I think the same is for him too. I mean, I'm sure there's things going on that he's like, 'Oh I shouldn't probably say that,' you know, or 'I shouldn't let her know that just happened,' or, you know, in terms of dangerous things, or, you know, things like that, so I'm sure it goes both ways (#23; 444-448, 450-451, 528-531).

Averi, and Stacey discussed making decision-making struggle explicit:

Things were really violent over there. I mean they were getting hit with IEDs constantly. He never told, he wouldn't tell me about it, 'cause he didn't want me to worry and that's kind of what he heard from all the soldiers over there, 'Don't tell your wife.' I know some wives are, it seems like it was a matter of preference, so we talked about it, and he said, 'Well what do you want me to tell you? This is

what they tell me I should and shouldn't tell you. What do you want to know?' And um I just told him, you know, 'I don't want. I don't want you to lie to me, but I also want you to be able to tell me if you're stressed out or if you need my support. I want to be there to support you, so I need you to at least give me enough so that you feel like you're being supported by me and not acting like everything's fine and dandy over there.' So that was left to his discretion. I kind of trusted what he thought I could and couldn't handle. So as the violence went down, he slowly revealed to me all the stuff he hadn't revealed as it was happening. And I was happy he hadn't told me because I was already worried enough just seeing Mosul on the news all the time with all the civilians and the car bombs and everything (#18; 114-126).

Sometimes I'm like I heard from people that you should not tell him so much about what's going on at home like if [our daughter's] sick or something, but he said he want to know. So sometimes I tell him stuff, and afterward I'm like, 'Ok maybe shouldn't have said,' but he wants to be in our lives, so I tell him everything that goes on...Because they're like they have to focus on their mission so don't tell them too much stuff going on at home so he can really focus on it. I guess some people do it like that, but I can't do it and he doesn't want me to do it (#12; 219-222, 224-226).

As indicated by Britney, Averi, and Stacey above, wives felt they had the choice to involve each other in their emotions and experiences, which from afar occurred exclusively through communication, or withhold information and feelings from each

other. Each choice served different functions for the partners and the relationship, but each also had drawbacks, making it difficult for wives to know which was the best communication policy during deployment.

### *Open Communication and Involvement*

Although it was often difficult to maintain, especially when they could not contact their husbands, many wives thought open communication was imperative to keep the relationship functioning across the long distance and time period. In fact, it was so important that several wives said they kept notes for themselves so they wouldn't forget to tell their husbands things that had come up throughout the days or weeks between phone calls. They also mentioned that since their husbands are restricted from sharing all information, based on Operation Security (OPSEC) or a simple lack of privacy during conversations, they would talk in code so they could still communicate openly. So, overall, many couples chose not to shelter each other from information so as not to inhibit the communication that may be a symbol of the relationship. As Shawna, Makenna, and Stacey concluded,

You just have to keep, keep talking about what you're going through. And you know, what you're doing at home and what he's doing there because I feel like there is the opportunity, especially for people that haven't been together long, there's the opportunity to just drift apart and that's why there's a lot of infidelity during deployments. And it's hard obviously, but I just think if you keep talking and just keep making your marriage or relationship work, and I don't know; I think it's really hard...I would say, the one that I learned just this week, you have

to make a list of things to talk about, or that are important that are going on, just like basic things like taxes. I keep on forgetting because I just get caught up in the moment, and then you're like whoa, you get frustrated with yourself because you didn't talk about the taxes that are important... Try to talk or email everyday if you can (#15; 640-645, 650-653, 655).

Yeah, there's some things that are secret and whatever else, and I understand that, but the stuff he can tell me, I'd rather him be able to tell me, if that makes sense. I would rather be the person he can talk to (#01; 480-482).

I tried to kind of filter what I say to him, but our relationship is communication and we can't filter that out. We can't just be like, you know, which I think is partially why he's more open with talking about things, because, with how we are with each other. We have to talk to each other (#24; 1072-1075).

Couples relied on varied conversations throughout the deployment in order to stay involved in each other's lives. One of the most common areas of discussion involved simply checking in with each other, or taking care of daily business. Partners also talked about family, the kids, and the future. In addition to these daily check-ins, and perhaps most significant to the difficult choice of involving each other in versus protecting each other from information, some women mentioned they were open with their own feelings, expectations, and needs. Some also felt their husbands were open with information about what they were doing or feeling. In sum, many women reported they discussed everything as a couple, if they had the time and ability to do so. Heather and Frances

shared examples of the conversations wives described in terms of maintaining involvement in their relationships during deployment:

He misses the little things. He told me that. I think it was yesterday. He misses the little things with them. 'Cause I try really hard to tell him as much as possible about the stuff they're doing, 'cause [our daughter] is just plain funny. She's just a funny little girl. So I try to find something funny that she's done every day to tell him about. And he's glad to hear it, and at the same time he's sad he's not here to see it (#08; 994-998).

He tells me usually about his day, what he did, and if we get more time it's getting more like deeper: how we feel, how the other one is really doing, what we're gonna do when he's getting back, stuff like that. But most of the time it is first about [our daughter], how she's doing. He's watching her on the webcam and really excited about that. Yeah, if we get the chance, it's going deeper. We talk about how we miss each other; we talk about the past, yeah what we're gonna do when he's getting back (#12; 127-132).

Andie and Clair also provided examples that further illustrated how these conversations helped couples maintain involvement:

We just talked about our relationship all the time. And I talk. I think I talk more about my life, 'cause his days were really repetitive, and he's also, he's military intelligence, so, there's a lot of stuff that he can't tell me or, you know, so mostly you know, we would talk every night at the end of the day from probably about 11 'til 1 or sometimes later. And it would just be the way that I ended my day. I

would just tell him everything I did that day and he would tell me like about his workout or something, and we'd get all lovey dovey, and sometimes we'd talk about our relationship...He's part of my life, you know. And he's the most important part of my life. And he's not like a distant idea part of my life, he's actually really there, and I'm able to really think about the things he says, you know, and I have all these goals and things that upset me, and he knows about all of them, you know? Like he knows everything. Like we are so open, we tell each other everything (#17; 178-184, 204-208).

But now that he's gone, ya know, just to keep him in touch with how the kids are doing or how our lives are going on with whatever's going on, you know, just keep him in touch with that calm versus also him just letting us know what he thinks is new and exciting going on in his life (#11; 85-88).

Women felt that choosing open communication, based on this need for involvement, was important to sustaining their relationships. They reported several more specific relational functions this openness and involvement served, including preserving relational closeness, ensuring a smooth reunion, and providing an outlet for their husbands.

*Closeness.* Women felt that knowing what was going on across the distance, and staying involved, helped them feel closer to their husbands. It lessened the emotional distance between them. They felt like if they were able to talk, they could continue progressing in the relationship, getting to know each other, and learning relationship skills, all of which would contribute to the intimacy and closeness in the relationship.

Kari and Anette exemplified how openness helped partners feel closer:

I got an email from him, and I was reading it and it just made me cry 'cause it was like, 'Ah, my husband still is alive. Like, not some warped version of him that's working over there.' But he sent me one this past week about a ramp up ceremony, which literally means the ramp of the airplane is going to go up after they put caskets onto the plane to go home, and he was telling me about how I don't know two or maybe three Marines died...It just reminded him that this is a real war and that people are dying for their cause and all that kind of stuff. I mean things that he's, I mean he's a quiet, private person, so he doesn't, ya know he's not like a loud mouth that just likes to say everything. I tend to be more in that camp. So for him to share that with me reminds me that we still have that connection (#14; 320-324, 326-330).

We talk when he's deployed. We talk about things that we could change about each other if there's something that he don't like about me or if there's anything that annoys me what he's doing, stuff like that. We're just trying to work on our relationship 'cause he's not there, so we have to give it something so it can keep growing (#13; 194-197).

Heather illustrated how open communication involved learning how to best communicate over the distance to maintain closeness:

You have to work harder to connect. You have to learn how to fight. Um so when you're arguing about something you have to be able to resolve it quickly and forgive and get past it. We do fight. I mean, they don't like magically become a perfect person when they go over there as much as you'd like them to be. They

still do like hard-headed things, so um but you do you have to know what's important, you have to speak clearly about what your problem is, you have to get over it, and the consequences if you don't are just too big 'cause you don't have that reconnection after you have that fight. You just aren't able to touch, you aren't able to look into each other's eyes (#08; 181-187).

*Smooth reunion.* In addition to feeling closer to their husbands and learning relationships skills, women felt maintaining a connection through communication also allowed them to reunite more smoothly with their partners. Daily check-ins, or family business discussions, were particularly helpful in allowing partners to stay updated on each other so they could transition easily back into life at home. However, more personal conversations also helped partners ease back into the more intimate aspects of being a couple back together again. Anna and Maddie expressed how maintaining involvement can help couples reunite more smoothly:

It's very easy for us to get back in the swing of things because we do talk about, like I said those business phone calls, he knows what's going on, there's no 'Well, hey you got a new couch, what's the deal with that?' It's, 'Oh yeah, that couch looks awesome, good choice' ... The intimate aspect of it you do miss, but the business part is essential because it's what keeps the oil in the machine, is what I call it, there's no big surprises when he comes home (#04, 405-407; 410-411). My thing is, it's life, you know? If you don't allow yourself to express to the one person you should be able to, then it builds up resentment, and then when he comes home, yeah you're gonna be happy for the first couple of weeks, but then

all hell's gonna break loose. 'I did this, I did that, while you were gone.' No, it's not conducive to the relationship whatsoever. You know? And sometimes I do hold back, and my husband's like, 'No what's wrong.' Like, 'No it's fine, I'm dealing.' And he's like, 'Baby just tell me, that's what I'm here for.' You know, he'll make me laugh and then I'll tell him (#22; 105-111).

Riley made a direct comparison between what reintegration would look like with and without open communication:

One of the things that's most important to us is that we continue to stay connected with each other. So, I think that if we didn't communicate with each other as much as we do now, I think the integration period and the adjustment period would be harder and take longer when he would come home because we'd have to get familiar with each other from square one versus square three because we've been in contact all the way along. So, but we still express desires, concerns, anything that, we don't want to hide anything from each other, shelter you know somebody from what's going on. He'll tell me about the car bombings that are going on, the rocket attacks, how close they are, how many times he's had to go the bunker. He shares that part of his world with me, which worries me in a sense, but actually it's a way for us to connect with each other (#05; 194-203).

*Outlet.* Lastly, women felt that being able to talk openly provided a much-needed outlet for their husbands. They knew their husbands often struggled with being away, and faced difficult situations overseas, so they wanted to be a safe place for their husbands to

let out the emotions that were often kept in during deployment. Makenna explained how she wanted to provide a safe place for her husband to discuss emotions and experiences:

I try to make it so I'm a safe place for him to talk. If anything did happen to him, I know he would tell me because I know that he would know that I'm a safe place. I don't want to be one of those spouses that they can't talk. There's people that would never tell their spouses that they got shot at because they know their spouses would freak out about it. I try not to be one of those. I try to be somebody that he can talk to no matter what is going on. I would rather know... But I'd rather he tell me. I'd rather be that outlet. I don't want him to keep stuff in. I'd rather him be able to tell me (#01; 461-466, 469-470).

Alex also wanted to provide an outlet for her husband:

He can't share the majority of them with me, because he does have the top-secret clearance and because there's things that he does. He can't necessarily talk about all of that to me, but he talks to me and tells me whatever he can... Marines are kinda, I guess anybody in the military you can say, they're kind of told you don't show emotion and you don't talk about your emotion. You don't cry. I mean it's not a good thing to have those emotions, and it's taken awhile for him to open up finally about a lot. And to his dad he'll open up to and me he'll open up to and that's it. So even to get him to open up to talk about those feelings is great. And it's nice to finally know that we're at that point in our relationship where he can trust me with those type of things... It does affect me. It makes me extremely sad, it makes me nervous, knowing that he feels, like how he feels and there's nothing

that I can do about it. It's kind of one of those things that I guess I've just learned to deal with (#21; 322-324, 351-356, 380-382).

To summarize, many women felt that open communication was imperative to sustain a deployed relationship. When Stacey said, "Our relationship is communication, and we can't filter that out" (#24; 1072), it was particularly striking because it became clear that during deployment all the partners had, in terms of maintaining a connection with each other, was communication. As mentioned in relationship losses (as part of the relational experience), partners could not touch and they could not participate in activities and events together. They could not see each other on a daily basis. They could only share their individual experiences, feelings, and concerns. Yet choosing to do this was difficult because although they felt maintaining involvement could help create closeness, make the reunion easier, and provide an outlet, they also thought it could lead to vulnerability and sadness as partners realized all they were missing. So while open communication was one relational coping strategy, restricted communication was another viable approach.

#### *Restricted Communication*

Even with the perceived benefits of open communication and involvement for many women and their relationships, some women reported that they did not communicate openly in their relationships about feelings or experiences. Some women withheld feelings and/or information from their husbands, and many also knew their husbands withheld information and feelings from them.

Limited disclosure occurred in part because husbands were not able to share all of their experiences (e.g., OPSEC), and also sometimes because women felt conversations became dull and repetitive when all they could do was talk about themselves. They did not always want to share their feelings and experiences when they were expected to do more of the sharing than their husbands. However, even if it might be more exciting than talking about their own lives at home, not all women wanted to know what their husbands were experiencing overseas. Knowing often meant worrying, and they wanted to avoid this worry. Pamela and Taryn illustrated this reluctance, or inability, to communicate openly:

And you know, with OPSEC, there's only so much you can say. You know, obviously they don't want you to tell your wife everything. And sometimes things are completely classified to where you cannot tell you wife. But then there's times where, yeah, you can tell your wife and it's ok (#16; 411-414).

You know, honestly, we've had the [relationship] conversation a million times and there's only so many times you can reiterate the same thing, so I get so annoyed every time he starts to try to talk about that, you know? I'm just kinda like, 'Look, listen there's nothing we can do about it right now, so let's not even talk about it. Let's just roll with it and when you get home;' I hate talking, I hate talking about that stuff. There's nothing more uncomfortable and just I feel like I'm being attacked and I just hate it (#09; 314-319).

Drew and Danielle also expressed a reluctance to communicate, and further explained that they did not want to know everything going on in their husbands' worlds:

So, I mean we as much as I say we try to talk about things, there's a lot of things we don't talk about and I think it's more on purpose that you know there's just no, you know, I don't want to know what's going on over there sometimes. I don't want to know that you guys just lost somebody or that, you know, I really don't want to know 'cause all that does is make me worry, and so it kind of goes both ways. Sometimes I think he would like to talk about some of that stuff, but he knows that I don't want to hear it. There's some things that I want to talk about with him that he doesn't want to hear it. So were we both here we would probably share those things; we just don't (#07; 357-364).

I don't really care to know. I don't need to know, God forbid, anything happened to their jet, it goes down, they're captured. I'm not gonna be the one that gives away all the secrets 'cause I don't know. I'm not gonna be responsible for everybody else's husband getting killed—for telling the secrets. And that's how I see it. And that's how my husband sees it thankfully because I don't want to know. If they come knocking on my door, I don't want the news knocking on my door if something were to happen and me being emotional and just giving them all the details that don't need to be shared, you know. So if I ask a question, and I don't need to know it, he'll just say, it's not for you. And I've learned to just say, 'ok' (#25; 441-449).

This final quote also shows how wives sometimes avoided information because they felt a sense of obligation to protect the confidentiality of the missions, their husbands, and themselves. This protection was the main function of restricted communication.

*Protection.* With all the noted benefits of disclosure between partners, it may seem counter-intuitive that partners are reluctant to openly communicate as much as possible. However, women felt that withholding information and feelings served a variety of protective functions. First, withholding allowed partners to avoid worrying, burdening, or hurting each other. More specifically, women noted they did not want to share too much because they did not want their husbands to feel left out. Women knew their husbands miss out on life at home during deployment, and they did not want to make their husbands feel guilty or sad about it. Also, women noted the need to help their husbands disconnect from home and keep their heads in the game during deployment. They did not want, or knew they could not, allow communication to distract their husbands from their missions because it might affect their job performance and safety. So, although less common in practice than more open communication (especially with the women as information senders), some women perceived that withholding communication served a protective function for themselves, their husbands, and their relationships. Erika and Heather explained why they chose to withhold their own emotions during deployment, showing how they did not want to burden their husbands:

I can't, I can't let him see me this way because then he feels guilty, and I don't want him to...I can't, since he is over there in a foreign country trying to do all this other stuff, like I can't let him see the fact that this is really hard for me...I can't let him see the fact that I'm miserable sometimes and that it's hard. He's starting to figure out I have certain things that I say and mannerisms that show

him that I'm not really doing as well as he thinks I am doing... I think he chooses to ignore it because it's just as hard on him (#02; 51, 59-60, 66-68, 70).

He's talked a little bit to me about the guy that was lost and he's been opening up a little with me. But right now I try to be supportive and not burden him any more than he already is with my emotions that are all over the place (#08; 448-451).

Averi and Pamela knew their husbands needed to remain focused on their missions, and they did not want to distract them:

Like I remember thinking he needs to go out and do patrols tomorrow and is possibly gonna get hit by an IED, do I really want our last conversation being like, 'I need more love from you, I'm really upset,' you know? I didn't want it to be that. It's like, I didn't even want to express any frustration or sadness or feeling, like, and also he didn't have time... I think really, yeah in some ways I think at least in my head the ideal Army wife is completely supportive of her husband the whole time he's there, so that she doesn't have to make him distracted. You know? Like when he goes out on a patrol, I don't want him to be thinking about us. I want him to be thinking about the enemy, you know, and his own soldiers and keeping everyone alive (#18; 770-773, 777-781).

He started calling me like seven times a day, which you would think is great, but it's not because if he is needing that attachment to home so much, because it's really weird, once they leave, you actually want them to break off from here because they have to be in the game there. They have to just put their blinders on, they can't think about home, they can't think about, you know, what they're

missing out on, what they're not getting. They have to really just like totally break, and just be a soldier. They can't be a husband, they can't be a son, they can't be a father, not at least to me. They have to, you know, just go into soldier mode and really keep their head in the game (#16; 140-147).

Kristin explicates the varied reasons for withholding feelings and information during deployment as well as the reciprocal nature of the protective function of limited sharing:

He [talks] to a certain point but I think a lot of what, a lot of what he saw, he'll talk about like the kids, he'll talk about the buildings, he'll talk about like the markets, how things are run, but you know he can't talk to me about the missions. Um, he doesn't talk to me about, his commander was killed this time, and that was hard for me too, because our kids played soccer together. And so I know that affected him, but it's like you know he doesn't want to, if he dwells on it, especially while he's over there, then he can't, he can't continue doing what he's supposed to be doing with a clear head. So he just kind of throws it away, and it'll come back when he gets here. And you know some things he'll say in passing, but not, and I think he doesn't want me to worry. You know, he's thinking that, 'You have enough to worry about over here than to worry about whether or not I'm gonna make it through the day over there.' And he's in a safer position this time so I don't worry as much. But you know, he's he's pretty limited on that information most of the time... The little stuff I leave out. I don't tell him a lot of uh what I worry about. I don't tell him a lot about what goes on back here. [Our daughter] got sent to the office, I don't go on about it. Or I didn't tell him for a

long time that I took [her] to a counselor because I didn't want him to feel bad, like he was affecting her and her future...I protect him and he protects me and then we get back a lot of that stuff doesn't matter anymore (#06; 203-214, 249-252, 261-262).

With this choice to openly communicate and maintain a strong connection or withhold communication and protect each other from worry and hurt, it is no wonder that partners struggled when deciding which style of communication, or what levels of each, would be most effective for coping with deployment. When analyzing the functions of each communication style (open or closed), it is impossible to ignore the downsides that each may also elicit. For example, if open communication can help decrease emotional distance for these women, then it is possible withholding communication creates the distance some felt had crept into their relationships (as mentioned in the relational experience). If withholding helps protect their husbands during missions, then openly communicating might distract them as they are thinking about home rather than their immediate surroundings. Each communication style also has implications for uncertainty, as each can help control uncertainty as well as create it. Open communication may help reduce uncertainty, while withholding creates uncertainty because it is hard not knowing what is going on in each other's lives. Yet at the same time, knowing certain aspects of their husbands' lives can also create uncertainty, and not knowing might help women avoid it. As Pamela said,

I mean, he'll tell me, but, and actually we talked about this when he was home for R&R. 'Cause he, when he gets home, he does need to talk about the stuff that he's

seen, but it totally freaks me out. Like he told me a story when he was home, and I could barely handle it, and so I'm like, 'You're gonna need to talk to Little Brother about those things from now on... You can tell me about the times you were missed, but not the times you were hit.' So, I guess, if that makes sense, so you know, I guess the death is what just I can't handle in general (#16; 387-391, 432-434).

In sum, there can be positive and negative consequences to both open and closed communication strategies, and both are often adopted at varying levels within the same relationships as ways of coping with the strains of deployment and working toward a future together again.

#### *Maintaining Positive Relationship Quality*

Many of the functions of open or restricted communication pertain to protecting the self, the other, or the relationship. In line with the motivation of protecting the relationship, women discussed a few coping strategies that helped maintain the quality of their relationships in the face of such a disruptive and distressing event. Maintaining positive relationship quality can be distinguished from the process and function of open/closed communication (e.g., involvement, closeness, outlet, protection) because although it relies on some level of contact it is not directly tied to the choice of open versus closed communication. These strategies included sustaining affection and positivity, participating in virtual joint activities, and confronting morbidity.

### *Affection and Positivity*

When talking with their husbands through different communication media, women felt they were able to keep positive aspects of the relationship intact through humor, laughing, and affection. These were all areas of the relationship women missed (i.e., relational loss), so they appreciated when their husbands could provide these qualities from a distance. Acting positively and affectionately also made women feel loved, and helped build trust, both relationship qualities threatened during deployment (i.e., relational hardship). Britney and Maddie exemplified how couples kept the relationship affectionate and upbeat during deployment:

I think that our communication is better. I think that we've been able to expand on subjects that we haven't really gone into as much previously, I guess. I guess just, probably also just being able to know that I can trust him. So I mean, trust has, is hard. I mean, it's a hard subject to deal with, but I really felt strongly this time that I could trust him. And I think that that continues just by the things he says, the sweet little, you know, things he says in his emails, or you know, he's bought me several nice little gifts that he'll send me, and, just, you know, it makes me feel like he can't wait to get home to us (#23; 176-183).

We're strong, we back each other up. We're each other's cheerleader, basically, you know? He's had a bad day, I write him an encouraging email, or I'll send him some stupid funny jokes or really stupid pictures, anything to make him smile or laugh. Pictures, I take so many pictures of the kids, it's not even funny... So I'll send pictures, and I send, I don't send posed pictures, I send like her in the middle

of a fit, or doing the stink face, you know, so he experiences all of it. Anything to make him smile, and the same thing for him; if I'm having a bad day, he'll do the same thing for me. Mainly he'll call me and he'll start doing his impersonations and he'll just make me laugh (#22; 248-2560).

Andie recognized the effort her partner put forth in maintaining positive relationship quality:

We're in a very special situation, and he takes every effort. I know that he's done everything. He sends me flowers every month. Every month. I'm like I have pictures of them like on my Facebook. I have like a, if you look at my photo album's, it'll be like January flowers, February flowers, March flowers, you know? And so I get flowers every month, and uh he puts a lot of effort into it (#17; 581-585).

#### *Joint Activities*

Also as a way to keep relationships strong during deployment, several women said they tried to participate in joint activities with their husbands. They could not go out for dinner, to the movies, or shopping, so they tried to find virtual activities to help keep variety in their conversations and time "together." Over the Internet and using web cameras, women said they conducted house searches together, shopped, read, and even played games. As Andie and Riley reported,

But we definitely, we look up articles and send them to each other...The first place, he had Skype and he had internet in his pod and he had Skype, and we would go on Skype two hours plus a day, and we'd do, um, I sent him like half a

board game, or like all these different ways that we could play board games, like we played Guess Who and Battleship (#17; 122, 158-161).

We've also done a lot of relationship enhancement readings. We'll read books together. We might have some worksheets of something like that. Just to kind of continue to grow and explore each other even though we're not living together. So to keep our relationship on the forefront, always thinking about it (#05; 179-182).

### *Confronting Realities and Fears*

Finally, women discussed how they found ways to deal with morbidity salience, recognizing their realities involved the possibility of their husbands never coming home. To deal with these realities, wives employed two different types of strategies: valuing the time they did have “together” and end-of-life conversations prior to or during deployment. For example, they learned to resolve conflicts, make the most of their conversation time, and end on a high note in conversations because they realized it could be the last time they spoke. This helped couples avoid dwelling on the negative and keep focusing on the positive. And, although difficult, women also said they had conversations about end-of-life issues (i.e., funerals, wills) so they could reduce uncertainty about what to do in the case of tragically losing their husbands. Although seemingly difficult, the ability for couples to do this helped them feel more secure about their futures. Typically women said these conversations occurred in limited proportions and over time, so as to not to become overwhelmed with negative possibilities. Makenna, Anette, and Emma talked about the ways they communicated with their husbands to cope with morbidity salience:

It's always in the back of your head, what if something were to happen? I don't want the last thing to be an argument. I always will try to log off with, 'I love you, I miss you, and be careful.' That's my little routine I guess. Nothing's going to happen, but it's the little 'Be careful' is my way of saying, 'I love you' (#01; 439-442).

Since I can't talk to him like all day long or whenever I want to I always have the fear like if I fight with him or something over pointless things, like small things, and then somebody's gonna knock on your door and tell you something happens. You can't like apologize or stuff like that. And we only have like two hours a day of talking, so I don't see the point of fighting. I'm just trying not to (#13; 112-116).

And I hate to be down on it or be morose or whatever, but you never know when your last conversation is gonna be your last. And I don't mean that, because I'm a very positive person, but you also have to realize that that's a possibility, so every conversation we have it's always, 'I love you, take care of [daughter], give her a kiss for me.' 'Ok, take care of yourself, be safe, you know, I love you, can't wait to be able to see you.' You know, just like those kind of farewells I guess you could say. Um, and it really like it makes us appreciate the conversation that we are having on the phone (#20; 293-299).

Heather and Riley are examples of women who reported end-of-life conversations with their husbands:

We planned services before he left. We talked about what I should do with the insurance money. We talked about where I would live, what I would do for his daughter. So I have plans all the way. All the way, which comes with some weird sort of peace I guess because I know it's not the end if something does happen to him. But at the same time I think about raising them without him and having to explain to them, you know, who he was. So that brings up obviously the emotions (#08; 428-433).

Something else I wanted to mention that's very unique with my husband and me, and it might be unique with other couples as well, is we have talked about him not coming home. And we have talked about what kind of funeral he wants, where does he want to be buried, what does he want to have done with his possessions other than what's noted in the will, and things like that. How many couples do you really know that have really gone through such details that aren't in their sixties or seventies? We're in our twenties and thirties talking about this kind of thing. That is our reality (#05; 1023-1029).

All of these relational coping strategies helped women deal with negative deployment experiences and cultivate positive deployment experiences, maintain their relationships, and face the difficult realities that became salient during deployment. These coping strategies were all communicative; so based on the transactional nature of communication it appears both partners were actively involved in the coping process. In other words, wives discussed not only their own coping efforts and considerations, but also their husbands' efforts and considerations, when asked how they deal with

deployment. Partners' actions seemed to influence women's own actions as well as their interpretations of the coping process. The joint effort involved (or perceived) in these coping strategies makes them relational, and distinguishes them from personal coping strategies. Family coping strategies, involving women, partners, and their children, add another level of complexity to this coping process.

### Family Coping

Wives' perceptions of coping were intertwined with their perceptions of their husbands' behaviors and, in mothers' cases, their children's behaviors and feelings as well. Mothers in the group attempted to cope with their personal and family deployment experience, and help their children and husbands cope with each other's absence, through activities and communication in the family. In many ways the women acted as gatekeepers of the family coping process and of the father-child relationship. They employed various coping strategies to help manage their children's experiences, understanding, and relationships.

### *Engaging with Children*

#### *Special Mother-child Time*

As aforementioned, women felt their children were negatively affected by the absence of their fathers. They also felt their own relationship quality had decreased with their children. In response, they wanted to help make the experience as painless as possible. Many attempted to create activities and make special time for their kids in order to divert their attention away from dwelling on the deployment, missing daddy, and

feeling like they were losing two parents rather than just one. Jenn, Taryn, and Drew expressed using activities as a way to cope with deployment:

[My daughter's] got homework, she's got basketball, so we have a family, so we're never usually home. We really try to stay out of the house 'cause when we're at the house they get bored, and they get the computer and they want to talk to daddy. I'm like, 'Daddy is sleeping. It's daddy's night time there, daddy's bedtime.' They're like, 'Well, we want to talk to daddy.' I'm like, 'You can't. I am sorry, you can't talk to him right now' (#10; 588-592).

I do I try to overcompensate, too, by putting them in more activities when he's gone and you know dance classes and music classes and sports and everything. I do, I try... I think just um it diverts their attention, ya know? And it kind of diverts mine too because I'm constantly taking somebody somewhere, picking somebody up, or basically I'm constantly rushing around the city trying to make it somewhere on time. But um it's kind of nice to have somewhere that I need to be because otherwise we'll probably just sit around the house and clean all day, which is never fun (#09; 75-77, 170-174).

If I'm stressing out or if things are going crazy, I'll be like I don't want to be at the house this weekend because if I stay home the kids are going to wreck the house and I'm going to have to clean it all over again. So we try to go do as many things as we can. We try to go to the park, go to the zoo, go see the Christmas lights. We try to really go do things, you know, and we're always looking for things that are inexpensive and that they have fun at that are getting them out of

my house and keeping them from wrecking it and throwing toys all over the place (#07; 527-533).

Allowing time to engage with the children and do activities helped mothers and children avoid dwelling on the fact that their fathers were gone. Mothers also recognized their quality time was often limited with children. So making special time was also an attempt to make sure there were opportunities for mother-child engagement.

### *Attachment*

Although engaging solely with children was one strategy for coping with deployment, the time and ability to focus on spending time with children was limited in many cases. Many women noted that even with a lack of time they sensed a heightened attachment with their kids. Mothers felt their own affection had increased toward their children while their husbands were gone. They also noticed their kids clinging to them more than usual, perhaps because of the loss of their fathers. Jenn noticed her own attachment with her children had increased:

I realize that since he's been gone I've been huggin' the kids a lot more. I give them big hugs, and I'm like, 'I love you guys so much. I'm glad you're mine.' And I'm more affectionate with the kids than I ever was...I think it's 'cause I don't have him here to hug whenever I want it (#10; 523-525, 528-530).

Frances and Heather also noticed attachment changes in their children:

We hug a lot and she's like really cuddling a lot now. Before she did it with both of us, but now she's really focused on me, so I have to spend a lot of time holding her...Probably because I miss him too, and she I think she knows that he left

because she's like really on my leg and holding on my pants wherever I go, so I think she knows it and I think she's scared that I'm going too (#12; 159-161, 164-166).

[My daughter] has become more clingy with me, which is weird because I mean we spent most of the first year just her and me. And we never really, she's not a cuddly baby, and she's very difficult... I think she's kinda mad at him this time because he came back and she was a little standoffish, and she would ask for me a lot of times whereas before I was chopped liver when he was around. So, I think she is she's a little mad at him. Um and she doesn't have words yet 'cause she's two, so that's an interesting dynamic. She does like to cuddle more when she's never been a cuddly baby. So that's kind of nice, I love that (#08; 276-278, 287-291).

Mothers (and children) increased their attachment with each other to adapt to missing their husbands (and fathers).

### *Managing Change*

#### *Routine*

In addition to special time and attachment, mothers also attempted to maintain a routine with their children to provide a sense of stability and avoid superfluous changes. Mothers felt the children had experienced enough change in their lives (e.g., moving, paternal absence), so they wanted to limit additional disruptions in their lives at home. A routine helped keep things normal and consistent so that family life wouldn't turn into "while daddy is away" versus "while daddy is home." It also helped mothers schedule

their time so they could get everything done that they needed to do. Renee and Drew discussed how a routine can help manage the stress of deployment:

Yeah the kids and I have fairly a routine schedule I guess. Pretty much daily we kind of have it mapped out. They do certain things on certain days. Ya know, and we have bedtime at a certain time bath time at a certain time just for my own sanity because they're so young (#03; 11-13).

We just try to have a daily routine. Ethan's got chores he has to do. He's got chores he's got to do each day. I've learned to try to keep things simple. You know, we just try to do as much as we can. You know, usually I take them to school and day care in the morning, then I clean house, do laundry, do whatever I can or make whatever appointments need to be made... Basically we do as much as we can. The daily routine we cook dinner, my kids are in bed by 8 o'clock. I'm like that's for my sanity, and for them because then they can get up in the morning. But we have a pretty set routine. That's the only way we're able to function, by having a routine (#07; 471-474, 487-490).

Clair wanted to keep life as normal as possible for her children:

I try to keep everything as normal as possible, within our routine. You know, I try not to throw anything new at the children just because their daddy's not around so that's a big enough change for them. It was hard at first to adjust, but you know everything has kinda stayed the same. We go to school, and I do work, and then we just come home and do our nighttime routine (#11; 117-121).

### *Responsibility Adjustment*

Mothers also discussed ways they adjusted to increased responsibilities at home with their kids. This strategy involved recognizing limits and learning to let some things go, with kids and around the house, and promoting teamwork with children to get through what needed to be done. Recognizing limits and letting go of the little things, especially in terms of their parenting, enabled mothers to embrace their lack of control. Encouraging teamwork, on the other hand, allowed mothers, along with their children, to take control over all the new responsibilities placed upon them. Working together also helped mothers be productive while still spending time with their kids, which was often limited during deployment. Taryn and Kristin discussed the need to let some things go:

I think I'm a little bit more realistic about my parenting. I don't try to be super mom all the time anymore. Ya know when there is somebody else there to help you and do other household chores and just help with the kids, give baths and everything like that, it's just a little bit easier to achieve that, you know, like that status of, 'Man, you're a great mom.' I don't even try to be that anymore. You know, like I get the basics done. My kids are fed and clothed and bathed, but what if they go a day without a bath? I'm not going to beat myself over it (#9; 132-137).

We eat out a lot more. I'm like the queen of takeout and I just, you know, I just can't cook a meal every night 'cause I don't want to plop them in front of the TV while I cook. And then they don't want to be in there, they wanna be watching TV, and if I'm out here then they'll play. I let a lot more stuff slide. My mom's on

me about that all the time, 'You can't let things slide.' I'm like, you know, I pick my battles, and whether or not [my daughter] is dressed in yellow pants or a yellow shirt and red pants all day today, it's what she's gonna wear today. I just can't fight it (#06; 312-318).

Clair showed how teamwork helped her family manage new changes:

My son has definitely stepped up and been a big help. Ya know, I try to emphasize team work, and I tell them, ya know, 'Mommy's the only one here doing everything so you know when I ask you to go put your clothes in the dirty clothes, please do it.' Just the little things that normally they didn't do, but now that ya know it's just me and I have to take care of some stuff while, you know, I know they can handle some stuff. Ya know, I just kinda give 'em a little more responsibility, and they've really stepped up and took it in stride (#11; 124-129).

Many mothers wanted to maintain a sense of stability, and recognized they needed a strict routine to get everything done. However, faced with a lack of time and increased responsibilities, many also felt they needed to focus on the "big" things and found ways to work together as a family to get everything done.

These strategies for engaging with children and managing change, were intended to help the kids, but also the mothers, cope with the stress and strains associated with deployment. For example, diverting attention with special activities helped mothers evade negative reactions from their children and improve family functioning. Also, as long as mothers established a consistent routine, kids would feel the "normal" aspects of life and less disrupted by the deployment. On the other hand, finding a routine and promoting

teamwork also helped women feel less overwhelmed by their new responsibilities in the family (i.e., it offered them a sense of control).

### *Information and Reassurance*

Another type of family coping strategy involved encouraging children's understanding of deployment through information and reassurance. Mothers conveyed that deployment was very difficult for kids to understand based on their age and youthful misconceptions about context and time. To help children understand deployment, they tried to explain it in various ways.

One strategy for explaining deployment involved providing children with information. Mothers would explain to kids that daddy was at work so they would know where he was and what he was doing. In describing the job, some mothers tried to speak in positive terms, telling their kids that daddy was helping people and fighting the bad guys. Mothers also answered children's questions as they came up and tried to teach them lessons about the deployment. For example, one mother read books about soldiers and families and then discussed the moral of the story with her children.

In addition to informing children as a way to create understanding, mothers attempted to reassure their children about their fathers. Mothers would talk to their kids about how much daddy loved and missed them to reassure them that the relationship was still intact. They also assured their kids that daddy was safe and stated repeatedly that daddy was indeed coming home. He would not be gone forever. Because the children often didn't understand time well, mothers used calendars or other techniques for counting down the days until the deployment was over. One mom explained to her son

that daddy would be home after his next birthday. Another mom and her children counted trash days to countdown the weeks until daddy's return.

The following examples share the lengths to which these women would go to help their children understand the circumstances of the deployment and reassure them of their fathers' love and eventual return. They are presented together because many times the information and reassurance co-occurred. For example, Taryn's approach focused on explanation and understanding, but she also reassured her children that their father would be back:

It's hard because each one of them has a different way of dealing with the situation, but all three of them have a difficult time with it, so it's hard for me to explain to them, especially my oldest one who is getting old enough to understand the situation, it's hard for me to explain to her in laymen's terms what's going on while trying to not lie. You know, I'm trying to explain to them he'll be back, but in kids a year is a really long time, so they can't really see that far in the future. So definitely the hardest thing for me is dealing with the kids and making them understand and calming them down (#09; 55-61).

Drew emphasized information and understanding:

I make sure he knows where he's at; I make sure he knows what he's doing. You know it's important to my husband that [our son] knows that he, people would say, 'What's your dad doing?' And most kids are like, 'Well he's at war.' And my husband is like, 'I'm not at war, I'm helping people. I'm a medic.' That's

important for my husband for [our son] to know that he's not shooting at people. He's healing people. So we try to talk to [him] about it (#07; 599-603).

Clair and Heather explained how they reassured their children:

I just kinda have to tell them in that sense of time that daddy will come back. He's coming back. And they understand that he's not gone forever, that he will come back, and I tell them that. I'm like, 'Why? 'Cause he's also your daddy and he loves you and he wants to be with you.' So, definitely just reassure them that even though he's not here with us in [City] or here with us everyday, ya know, we still think about him...So, yeah, you know like I said, just to kinda mention stuff like that and keep telling them that you know. And he tells them that too on the webcam that you know he loves them, he misses them, and even my kids try to give him a hug when they're really hugging the laptop (#11; 328-332, 336-339). I say, 'Daddy had to go to work, and he misses you, and he loves you.' I say that to her every night, every night in bed. Yeah, 'He went bye bye, but he misses you, he wants to be here with you.' But there's not, I mean her comprehension isn't that great. She doesn't have a concept of time yet, so I can't say he's going to be home in six months because if I say he's going to be home, she's going to go look out the back door. That's difficult (#08; 1005-1009).

Finally, Jolene showed how difficult this family coping strategy, to explain and reassure, could be:

The number one hardest thing about my husband being deployed is having a child and knowing that my daughter, she's three, like I keep saying she's three, but she

understands that he's gone, and doesn't really understand why. I mean she doesn't, she knows that he's fighting the bad guys and keeping the mommies and the babies in Afghanistan safe, and that's her, how we kind of talk to her about it, but you know, it's just really hard...My daughter asked me if her father had gone to live with another family, like if he had another family in Afghanistan, because I told her that he was protecting the mommies and the babies in Afghanistan, and she thought that he just got a new family. And that was really hard because then I felt bad, you know? And I explained that, 'No Daddy's just there to fight the bad guys and make sure that the bad guys don't hurt the families over there' (#19; 231-235, 246-251).

In response to their children missing their fathers, and the questions they may have had about their fathers' absence, mothers tried to explain the situation and reassure their children that everything would be fine. They further promoted this perspective through creating a connection between children and their fathers.

#### *Creating Father-child Involvement*

Mothers worked hard as gatekeepers of the father-child relationships during deployment. They employed numerous strategies to foster children's involvement with their fathers. They felt that involving their husbands and children in each other's lives helped the entire family. It helped fathers because they missed their kids terribly during deployment, and it helped at home because children experienced separation issues that impacted their affective and behavioral adjustment. When fathers missed their kids, or kids missed their fathers, involving them in each other's lives helped them feel better.

Some mothers also stated, or implied, that remaining focused on dad helped them avoid complacency in their family relationships. As Kristin said,

It makes it worse for me when they want to talk about how much they miss him because I can't make it better, and you know I always want to make them feel better, but it also helps to hear that they do miss him, that they haven't forgotten. Because sometimes I think they get so busy, and we get so busy, not that we ever forget him and everything, but you know, it's kind of like I don't want us to be so complacent or used to him being gone (#06; 707-711).

One mother also said sometimes it felt like a persuasive attempt to convince her daughter she still had a relationship with her father, even though he was far away. In this respect, creating or maintaining father-child involvement was also a defensive coping mechanism employed to avoid schisms in the family structure.

### *Interaction*

Connecting children with their fathers occurred in different ways. First, mothers gave their children time to interact with their fathers. They enabled them to talk with their fathers on the phone, on the web camera, and through email. Mothers also helped their kids create boxes, letters, and crafts for their fathers, and they would send these boxes overseas. Jenn and Clair noted,

We made [daddy] Valentine's Day cards with foam hearts and foam um picture frame borders and put pictures of the kids in there and glued magnets to the back. And just stuff like that; and they love it, lots of coloring...[They] will sit there and make pictures and color things and are like, 'Alright we'll put it in daddy pile.' So

whenever we ship him something, ya know, it'll be in there (#10; 627-632, 636-639).

So, ya know, we um during those periods just to keep them in contact with what's going on and making him feel like, hey you know your family is still here and we're still thinking about you. We have the kids make little birthday cards, and we send them, like they painted one day some pictures, and we mailed them off to him, and we send him care packages, and I asked the kids what they wanted to put in there, and you know just to make them involved and you know connected with you know this is something special we want to send to daddy (#11; 298-304).

### *Paternal Presence*

Second, mothers attempted to create paternal presence, communicatively and behaviorally, at home. Although they were not facilitating direct interaction between children and their fathers, the mothers employed various techniques to keep him a part of the children's lives: mentioning him daily, talking about missing and loving him, talking about being proud of having him as a dad, blowing kisses to him, praying for him, and making "daddy dolls." They also showed the children pictures and videos of their fathers. Each of these techniques created paternal presence and kept dad as part of the family stories they told and created at home. Strategies such as mentioning dad daily and talking about missing and loving him also likely helped defend against complacency and emotionally distanced relationships. Kristin talked with her children about how proud they could be of their daddy:

I mean it breaks my heart that she has to live like this. And she tells me all the time, I'll never marry anyone in the military. I'm like, 'But they look good in uniform and they're so sweet and they have honor,' and she's like, 'No'...And I mean they love their dad. I was like at least you have like a real life hero, I mean. Everyone else says, 'Oh I look up to my dad.' You can say, 'Oh my dad went and did all this great stuff,' and I said, 'You can really mean it' (#06; 302-304, 306-308).

Renee and Frances tried to create paternal presence and incorporate their husbands into the family life in various other ways:

They each have [daddy dolls] and so at the beginning when they first left, I pulled all the pictures I could find of him and him and the boys and I put together like a Snapfish book. You know how Snapfish will bind books, so I did that. So just that, and just making sure that they, again more with [my older son] since [my younger son] doesn't even really talk a whole lot yet. Just making sure [dad's] mentioned on a daily basis. 'Daddy's at work,' or 'Daddy's doing this,' or whatever. Just kind of acting like, yeah, it's not too weird that he's gone.

Incorporating at least his name into their daily lives and stuff (#03; 389-395).

I show her pictures of her daddy. She's watching him on the web cam. We talk a lot about him and you know when I show her pictures, she's already pointing at him. That is pretty much all I can do for now because she's still so small...When I get dressed, she's always bringing me his shoes, and she knows it's her father's

shoes. She knows it, like they wave at each other; she's blowing kisses when he's on. She knows who he is (#12; 269-271; 273-275).

Jolene and her husband worked together to keep his presence salient in the home, even during his absence:

I have pictures of him that I'm putting in a frame and putting right next to the foot of her bed so that when she's just lying in bed she can see pictures of her and her dad and things like that. I also, what else, oh right before he left he video taped himself reading a book to her and he had the DVD and the book mailed to us. So that was her Christmas present from Daddy. And she'll sit there with this book and, you know, watch and read to her on the TV and then she gets to see him and hear him and doesn't forget what he looks like, and that kind of thing... The first thing every night that she says is, 'Thank you God for my mommy and for my daddy,' and oh some nights it makes me smile. Some nights it makes me cry. It depends on, you know, my day but, and the next thing she always say, the first thing after thank you for my parents is always, 'Thank you for keeping Daddy safe.' So I think that she feels that her prayers are what keep him safe. And so she feels like she's doing good things and, you know, looking out for her dad. We also, she does a ton of pictures for him and she tells him jokes on the phone and she, this is my fault... I used to tell her that her daddy was flying in the helicopters to check in and make sure we were ok. So every time she saw a helicopter she'd run out to sidewalk and she'd say, 'Hi Daddy,' and jump up and down and blow

him kisses. And she still does that. She still thinks that he flies in from Afghanistan and checks on us (#19; 795-801, 1172-1178, 1184-1188).

Emma summarized these strategies to create father-child involvement well:

So that's that's kinda tricky to think about too is, will she know daddy? Will she be like, 'I don't want anything to do with you, daddy, or whoever you are, man in ACUs,' you know? So you just kinda have to let her talk to him on the phone you know, show her pictures, and hope that somewhere in her mind it's like logged in there that yes her daddy is at work, but he'll be back in a year (#20; 148-152).

As illustrated in these stories, connecting children with their fathers and creating paternal presence evoked various emotions for the women. Although in some cases these strategies did not make them feel better personally, their efforts were continued for the overall good of the family relationships.

### Coping Summary

Many of these relational and family coping strategies (e.g., maintaining positive relational quality, reassuring the children, sharing fathers' feelings of affection) take on characteristics similar to emotional support. However, these strategies serve a variety of additional functions for women and each family as a whole. First, they help women avoid or reframe their own negative cognitive and affective responses (e.g., keeping busy, emotion coaching). Second, they help maintain the different family relationships (i.e., open/restricted communication, positive relationship qualities, father-child involvement). Third, they re-establish the father as part of the family experience (i.e., information and reassurance, paternal presence).

Coping strategies also tend to have both defensive and offensive qualities. On the one hand, they are defensive in that they help women avoid negative reactions personally and within the family. For example, mothers create special time and activities for their children and establish a routine in order to divert their children's attention away from negative emotions and the deployment. Keeping busy also helps women avoid their own negative reactions and distract from the focus on the absence of their husbands. On the other hand, many strategies are offensive in that they are active attempts to encourage dealing with the emotions and changes with which women and their families were presented. For example, women adjusted to increased responsibilities and dealt with morbidity salience with their children and husbands as a direct response to the challenges of deployment they faced. Of course, some strategies had both offensive and defensive qualities. For example, creating involvement (i.e., husband-wife and father-child involvement) was mostly offensive, in that it was an active response to the absence of the husbands/fathers and learning how to deal with that absence. However, it was also defensive in that maintaining or creating involvement helped women avoid complacency and distance in their family relationships during deployment.

In sum, women discussed their experience with coping as a complex and dynamic process occurring at the personal, relational, and family level. As such, their experience with coping incorporated, affected, and was influenced by all members of the family.

## CHAPTER SIX: SUPPORTIVE AND UNSUPPORTIVE RESOURCES AND RESPONSES

As introduced in the previous chapter, support is a valuable coping mechanism for women during deployment. Seeking support from friends, family, and husbands helped women get through the deployment period. When discussing support, there were many resources and communicative and behavioral acts women found particularly helpful and supportive. There were also, however, reactions women found very unhelpful or unsupportive. Both supportive and unsupportive attempts and reactions are discussed in detail in this chapter. Within each section, themes and sub-themes are discussed. For more complex sub-themes, different types of messages will be further delineated.

### Supportive Resources and Responses

Only a few women considered themselves “solo navigators” who could get through the deployment on their own. Anette was one example:

I kind of always handled it by myself. If I need something from the Army, I know where to go, but I don't really need it. He tells me what's going on and he's telling me the same stuff FRG is telling me, and if I need anybody from the Army I know where to go. I'm just 'cause for me it's not like I have to depend on other people. I want to do it myself, so I'm trying to find out things myself and stuff like that (#13; 327-331).

Even these few self-supported women, however, mentioned supportive resources and responses that were helpful during deployment. Illustrated in Anette's example, she was still relying on her husband for information even as she attempted to get through the

deployment on her own. There were numerous resources on which women could rely and a variety of supportive responses women felt helped them navigate the challenges deployment presented.

### *Military Resources*

First, the military offered sources of support for military spouses and families. Women discussed a multitude of resources available on military posts, including tax-free shopping, free classes, free childcare, youth services, religious services, information centers, counseling, and more. Also, women were assigned Family Readiness Groups (FRGs), which connect them with other military wives and their husbands' troops. These groups and resources can be a source of information and support, but many women were not actively involved in their FRGs or other base resources. Overall, some women found military resources and groups invaluable; others said that although they are available, many are unhelpful or go unused. Some of the reasons for the under-utilization will be discussed in the later section on unsupportive resources and responses.

### *Personal Resources: Friends, Family, Husbands, and Acquaintances*

In addition to military resources, women discussed various personal resources they relied on for support. As mentioned above, in terms of personal coping, many women said they needed to build their own community or informal support groups of people on whom they could rely. Most mentioned other people as the most beneficial supportive resources. In general, the women said family, friends, coworkers, husbands, and other military wives were the people who offered them support during deployment.

### *Different Roles for Supporters*

More specifically, women reported that different people in their lives served different roles or functions. Supporting was not a one-size-fits-all process. Military friends, non-military friends, husbands, and family members offered different types of support that were helpful in different ways. For example, Pamela's and Jolene's friends had different roles as support providers:

My best friend, or one of my best friends, she's a librarian, so she always keeps bringing books to read. So that's her thing to do. Kim's is to always answer the phone. Heather's is to send me pictures of [her son]. You know, it's kind of like they all have their little assignments and they know what they need to do to help me, and they do it (#16; 1171-1175).

So I have a few people who know what it's like, so if I'm having a hard day 'cause my husband's gone and it's a hard day because of the Army or whatever these are the girls that I call. But if I'm just, if I miss being home, or I'm missing out because they've had a bunch of blizzards, and I love the snow, on the east coast this year, then I'll call my girlfriends back home. So I kind of have different, you know, different people to support me for different things, which is nice (#19; 910-915).

Riley discussed her husband, best friend, and therapist as sources of support, depending on the need:

I would go to my husband for the emotional support of 'I miss you, I love you, this sucks being away from you.' more the personal stuff. Or, yeah, those would

probably be the big things as far as deployment, how it affects me emotionally. I would go to my best friend for something like, 'We're moving, change, my husband's being a butt-head and he's overseas and I can't do anything about it right now.' You know, that kind of thing. If I want to talk about him, she's the person I'd call, or my therapist, depending on what the situation is (#05; 716-721).

When asked more specifically what people do and say to support them, women reported an assortment of supportive acts these sources performed and why they were so helpful. Various supportive responses from family, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances are explicated below. The role of military friends, whose responses wives found particularly supportive, will also be discussed in further detail in a later section.

### *Interaction*

Women mentioned various supportive acts that friends, family, and others performed. First, women were grateful for people who offered them a space for supportive interaction. Knowing people were there to check in on them and listen felt particularly supportive for these women. Many said they needed people with whom they could talk, express themselves, and share adult conversation, as they were missing this aspect of their relationships during deployment. Overall, the women needed an outlet and felt comforted just knowing people were there to talk or listen when they needed them. Clair and Renee said,

But when you don't have that person to talk to like that, you definitely just pick up the phone and call somebody you know and just have them listen 'cause you know you just need it. You just need that outlet, that stress relief (#11; 213-215). If I'm talking to somebody I don't necessarily want advice, I just need to vent for a second... We always need people to talk to, and we're not necessarily, and I'm not necessarily looking for someone to solve my problems I just need to talk to somebody about it. And I think that would be, I'm not looking for you to, there is nothing you can do about the fact my husband's gone, and I'm not looking for massive amounts of sympathy. I just need somebody to talk to, and I guess that would be it. Rather than trying to say, 'Oh yeah, I know what you're going through,' say, 'I don't know what you're going through but I'm here to listen to you if you need to talk to somebody' (#03; 682, 683-689).

Knowing people were there to talk and check in on her made Makenna feel supported in a time of loneliness:

But I know I have people who I can talk to. I've got people that I know that if I needed to in the middle of the night call them and say I need somebody to talk to, they would be there. And that helps a lot; knowing that there are people there to help you... That support just knowing that it's ok and they're there. Or just calling. I have someone I don't know very well, but she called me Thanksgiving week just to check in on me. I said, 'Can you just call and check on me?' Sometimes I need that. Somebody just call me because it can be lonely, really

lonely. Just knowing that people care can make a world of difference (#01; 842-845, 933-936).

### *Recognition and Appreciation*

Simply being there and listening to the women when they needed to talk made them feel supported, but people could also offer helpful words. Within conversations, and in more casual meetings with people, women appreciated acts of recognition for their situation and sacrifice. For example, they liked hearing words of appreciation and concern, as long as it did not turn to pity or dwell too much on the negative. They also valued people saying they were proud and recognizing spouses had a difficult job at home during deployment. Pamela and Shawna exemplified the powerful and supportive effect of recognizing and appreciating their jobs and sacrifices:

The best things that my friends can tell me is how well I'm dealing with it. 'Cause I don't think that I'm doing very good, you know, because to me, I wouldn't want to cry any. I wouldn't want to lay around in my pajamas all day. But when they are like, 'You are doing so awesome.' I'm just like, 'Maybe I am'... That's the best thing that anybody can tell me is, 'Dude you're handling this so well, you're doing awesome,' you know? Or they'll say, 'I look at you dealing with this and I think I could do anything' (#16; 1103-1106, 1111-1112).

I call my mom, I talk to my family... They just seem to, I don't know, they sort of bring me back to, you know, a place that I love and I'm thinking about them, and I love my home, so you know that just calms me down and they seem to understand, and they think that I, they always tell me, 'You're doing a great job,

you're doing a great job at this,' because it's really hard. And I'm like, 'Oh thanks.' So that makes me feel good, 'cause I worried that I would just like, just be reclusive and not do anything (#15; 235, 237-242).

Along with statements recognizing what a good job they were doing, Emma and Jolene felt that thank you was a subtle, but supportive, response that showed appreciation:

The smallest things that people could do is just say thanks. That helps me out more than they could probably ever think it does is just to say, 'Thanks for all your work and keep going, you're doing a great job.' Just motivational things. It doesn't help me with physical things like taking my groceries up three flights of stairs, but it gives me the motivation to do it (#20; 963-967).

They grabbed my arm and they said, 'No thank *you*.' And just said, 'You know, for everything that you do in supporting your soldier and being strong.' I'm gonna start crying again, but that meant so much to me, and I wasn't expecting it. You know, everyone is all "support the troops" and that kind of thing, and you just, you don't expect anything else, and when someone comes along that says like, 'Thank you for the sacrifices that you make at home,' it's just like that means so much to me. I could hear it a hundred times a day. It would still mean so much to me (#19; 1079-1085).

Anna and Anette also enjoyed hearing words of gratitude:

I think probably the number one thing is it always, I mean, it doesn't matter where we are and someone comes up and says, 'Thank you for your service,' and then they turn to me and say, 'Thank you for your service.' Just I mean while I would

never have the courage to put on a uniform, having someone recognize the courage that it takes my husband everyday to do that is pretty tremendous and have them turn to me and say you're doing a good job too, it's pretty, it's a lot. It always makes me cry, I don't know why. But just a simple thank you is all I ever look for is a, 'Thanks,' you know, 'Good job' (#04; 625-631).

Thanks for doing that and just stuff like that. Or people shaking my hand and saying thank you. Those are like the little things that I appreciate, knowing that other people are, they might not be in the military life, but they thinking about them and are thankful that there are guys doing that and women too...I don't know it makes me feel like I'm not by myself. I know I'm not by myself but that there are people that appreciate it 'cause there are people that don't. They don't care, so knowing there are people that do care (#13; 422-425, 427-429).

Compliments and statements of pride, showing appreciation and recognition, were especially meaningful when they came from husbands. Jolene and Emma illustrated the sentiments of pride and appreciation they received from their husbands:

I told my husband about [my award], and my husband is kind of a man of few words when it comes to praising people around him, and I swear that was our longest conversation ever. And I read my award to him, and I was so excited, and for a half an hour, I did not interrupt him because he just went on and on and on about how I was the greatest wife, and he's so proud of me, and um the things that I do for the soldiers, and his soldiers, really means a lot to him. And it means a lot to the guys. A lot of the single soldiers don't have family, or friends to send them

things. So, it meant a lot to him and I just, I didn't really know what to say because he's not typically like that (#19; 326-333).

The best praise comes from my husband because he knows me the best, so all those strangers say all these kind things, and it makes you lift a little higher each day, but when my husband gets on the phone he's like, 'You're really doing a great job.' That to me is like I get a gold star for the day! Slap that next to my name! Alright I'll keep doing this, I can keep doing it. And honestly, um, every little bit helps... So when he says things like that, like thank you, like that regardless for what the reason is, I feel like my work is being appreciated, so it makes me motivated to do more (#20; 934-938, 953-955).

*Understanding and flexibility.* Women felt that people who tried to understand, or admitted they couldn't understand, and were flexible or low maintenance, also showed recognition of their circumstances. These friends were patient and allowed the women to be themselves, even on the off days. Clair and Riley explained the supportive nature of attempted understanding and flexibility:

So just that flexibility. Um for those people who don't know the military life, or when it comes to deployments, ya know, just to just to understand you know. I'm sure they might have some experience of some type of family separation or just uh you know brokenness of the family life, you know, so um so yeah just uh ya know just understand and be there for those people when they need the help (#11; 580-584).

Just flexibility. Pretty much, that's probably the thing that means the most to me, is giving me the time and space that I need, and the flexibility that I need to get what I need to get done but also have time to grieve, or, to grieve the loss of him not being home, because we do see it as a loss, and have time to myself to get over the grief, or the emotions, the immediate emotions before I can pick up where I left off and carry on. So just the time, flexibility, consideration (#05; 821-826).

Erika discussed the value of the more low maintenance friends:

It doesn't offend her if she asks me to do something and I don't feel like doing it. She doesn't get mad at me and that's huge... She doesn't get mad at me for that kind of stuff. And a lot of friends do; they get their feelings hurt if you don't ever wanna go out. And she's ok with me calling her and saying, 'Hey can I come over for a little bit,' or, 'Can you come over for a little bit?' And she doesn't ever ask why she just kind of lets me and she doesn't usually care if I'm quiet or not talking about it or whatever (#02; 564-565, 569-573).

Overall, recognition and appreciation as a form of support helped validate women and the sacrifices they felt they were making with and for their families. It made them feel like what they were doing was not in vain and that people actually recognized their difficult circumstances and appreciated their work at home and their husbands' sacrifices for the country.

### *Emotional Support*

Emotional support, or more overt illustrations of concern, reassurance and encouragement in response to women's emotional and behavioral challenges, was also supportive for military spouses. This type of support went beyond recognizing women's challenges and made attempts to reassure them that things would get better and encourage them as they navigated the struggles deployment. During conversations with other adults, encouraging aphorisms were meaningful and supportive for military wives. They helped remind women of their strength and ability to survive hardship. Wives mentioned a variety of these statements, including "Hang in there," "Don't worry," and "It's gonna be alright," that helped give them a boost of strength during deployment. Maddie, Averi, and Riley provided examples of emotional support and encouraging aphorisms:

[I] talk to [my mom], she's like, she tells me the same thing, 'Just do it. Brush yourself off. Stand up. You know, stick up your chin, shoulders back. You're a (Surname) girl first and foremost. You're strong you can do it.' And I do it (#22; 636-638).

They would say, 'He'll be fine. I know he'll be fine.' Oh my God, I loved it when people said that. Like that would make my day. It really, really would... Like, 'I'm sure it'll go by quick, he'll be fine, and he'll come home before you know it,' you know? But I liked it when they were specific. Like when they would say, 'He's, your husband's, really smart, he's a really good soldier, he's had really great training.' You know like when they were really specific about why he's

gonna come back and be fine that would be even more awesome (#18; 974-975, 980-984).

It's either words of encouragement or words of empathy or sympathy, like, 'I'm sorry that you're going through this,' 'Hang in there,' 'Good for you,' 'My gosh what a strong person you are for trying to pursue school while your husband's gone, trying to take care of your household while your husband's gone.' But pretty much identifying those things that I often forget about, you know, oh yeah, I am a functioning adult in society, I am paying the bills and going to school, and driving, and taking care of the dogs, my own needs and stuff. You forget about those, I forget about those things (#05; 845-851).

Emotional support gave Clair strength and motivation:

So they definitely sympathize and are there to give me support and also the strength and motivation, the positive reinforcement of saying, 'Hey you know it'll get better,' or 'This isn't forever'...I always call my mom for sure if there are those moments when I need that ya know boost...She just said, 'You know, you just get through it. You can do it. You know, this is just what's going on for now, and tomorrow will be a better day and you know so don't lose hope and just ya know be strong.' You gotta be strong for your kids and for your family, so like I said, she just gives me that boost and that positive reinforcement that I can do this 'cause like I said there are those moments when I just feel so overwhelmed sometimes, and I just look at the tasks at hand and I'm just like, 'Oh my goodness!' (#11; 399-401, 467-468, 474-479).

Husbands also offered pick-up statements, reassurance, and expressions of concern, which made wives feel supported. Husbands' statements reassured women that everything would work out, and encouraged them to look toward the future. As Riley and Kari remarked,

[My husband] spends time with me. A lot of the time, if he gets the sense that I need him more to talk to or, pretty much just to talk to, he will sacrifice some sleep that night, just so he can focus on me for awhile. He'll send me little notes through the mail. He'll send me emails just letting me know he's thinking about me. Just reassuring that everything's gonna be great, 'Focus on the future, it sucks right now but hopefully it's temporary' (#05; 399-403).

He's the only person really in the world that can tell me that I'm being ridiculous 'cause he won't say it unless it's true. He's just got so much credibility. I mean, it's just like, 'I know you're sad, but you know we have so much to look forward to,' or 'I know it's really hard for you, but just think about when I get home.' I mean, those kind of things 'cause he doesn't say them that often, you know? And when he does they mean 10 times more (#14; 933-937).

*Tough love and humor.* Other positive strategies for offering emotional support included tough love and humor. Expressions of tough love were helpful when women felt they needed a kick in the butt to get back into the swing of life. Using humor and focusing on the positive was also helpful because it lessened the focus on deployment and helped keep conversation light. Maddie and Anna exemplify these strategies of tough love and humor:

With my mom, you would think it's, 'Oh baby it's gonna be ok.' No, my mom's the type of person, she's very loving, she is a southern woman, but she's very blunt, even more so than me. She's like, 'Baby get your head out of your ass and just do what you gotta do. Alright?' I'm like, 'Alright.' You know, that's the type of person I am. You don't need to butter me up. I'm the type of person, I need a kick in the ass, you know? Yeah a little butter every now and then is fine, but no, she's like, 'Baby girl I love you, just shut up and deal with it.' ...My husband's a real big kick in my ass, but in a loving way. You know? We'll sit there and fight over the phone playfully, just break it up. But with my mom, kick in the butt.

Sometimes she's a sympathetic ear. She can tell which one I need. You know. Do I need a mommy or do I need a friend? She's pretty good with that (#22; 783-788, 795-798).

A lot of it's humorous like, 'Oh you're never gonna believe what so and so did,' or 'This is so funny, my husband's deployed and this happens to me,' or 'I had a pipe break when my husband was deployed, and I have water stains on my ceiling from where it leaked through my ceiling.' It was funny at the time 'cause you have to laugh, otherwise you'll just cry. But yeah, it's funny, it's humorous: you gotta find new humor in each situation otherwise you'll, you know, probably off yourself (#04; 54-550).

Uplifting, motivating, and humorous statements from friends and families, and the more general conversations, helped reassure the wives and calm them in the midst of the deployment storm.

These forms of emotional support, including reassurance, encouraging words, expressions of concern, humor, and tough love, made women feel that people cared about them. These responses also helped women manage their emotions. Emotional support calmed the women and made them feel loved and supported in a time when sadness and loneliness had the opportunity to take over. Many times, and as illustrated in examples, emotional support and signs of recognition and appreciation occurred in tandem. Supporters would recognize (and show appreciation for) the women's difficult circumstances and try to make them feel better simultaneously.

#### *Activities and Invitations*

In addition to the more communicative forms of support illustrated above, activities and invitations to do things together made women feel included and were very helpful during deployment. Sometimes women just wanted to hang out, rather than talking about the deployment. In addition to simply offering fun things to do, this form of support provided a distraction for women so they would not dwell on the deployment. It also made them feel less alone, since loneliness was a highly felt emotion during deployment. Clair felt invitations and activities gave her the opportunity for the conversations she was missing with her husband gone:

I've even had people you know invite me over for dinner. You know, again have that adult conversation, you know, just to ya know, I guess what you would say give me a break. Just come enjoy some family time with us, ya know, good food and good conversation. So that's always nice too. It's been wonderful (#11; 442-446).

Stacey, Jolene, and Taryn illustrated how invitations and activities helped divert their attention away from the hardship of deployment:

We don't want to focus on the emotional stuff. We want to be distracted by fun stuff. And be like, 'Oh, well me and a friend are doing this, want to come with?' (#24; 1150-1152).

Just getting up and going bowling with your friends. Or, you know, just getting out of the house, getting dressed up and going to dinner with your friends. It's about just getting up and knowing that you have a life too and it's not totally consumed with the military and the deployment, but you can still go. For Valentine's Day we went shopping. We weren't going to have a pity party. We went to dinner with our kids, you know? They were our dates, and [my friend] bought this really nice necklace from a jewelry store and I bought \$500 worth of clothes at Macy's, and we had a blast (#19; 1056-1062).

There was not a weekend that went by that we weren't either having a neighborhood cookout or meeting up at you know some beach or going to the falls and there's a nice paved walkway there and we'd go up to a waterfall, and that's a day out to get the kids out. And I guess as long as your focusing on something that your going to do or actually doing something you know you'll be fine. You don't always have to be talking about it, but diverting your own attention as well as your friend's attention helps (#9; 702-707).

### *Instrumental Support*

Instrumental support was also a constructive form of support. Instrumental support included offering help, especially practical, specific help, to women. As previously noted, these women were extremely busy and often needed assistance while at home without their husbands. As such, assistance with childcare was particularly helpful; but different ways of sharing responsibility and offering backup were supportive as well. Having help from others gave these women some time off and released some of the burden of running errands, taking care of the kids, cleaning, and other household tasks. In some ways, others became husband replacements, taking some of the load husbands would typically bear. Taryn, Kristin, and Renee showed how offering help was extremely supportive:

I think when he's gone, ya know, the saying "it takes a village to raise a child" really comes into play because you, me in particular, it took me a long time to realize that you know I cannot do it all. So it takes a lot to allow people to help you, but you know, being here my mom helps out a lot. She takes them almost every Saturday, and they spend the night, and basically that's when I really like get most of my housework done, my errands and stuff like that. I'll usually clean the whole house Saturday night (#09; 395-400).

There's a lot of stuff that we don't do because I just can't do it all on my own. So if I had someone to go along with me, I mean that would be great...[My in-laws] used to call on Sundays, and be like, 'Hey we are going to the Commissary, what do you need?' And I could tell them, 'I need bread, milk, water and lunch meat.'

And they would bring it all over here and drop it off. And to me, that was probably the biggest thing that they could've done for me because I couldn't (#06; 924-926, 931-935).

[My sister's] a big help. Just again, she'll do some of the stuff, she won't touch Diaper Genie, but she does the whole, you know when I'm getting the kids ready for bed, she'll do the picking up, so she's kind of, you know, in that sense, does a lot of what [my husband] did. Just different things like that. So she is a big help, she really is (#03; 273-276).

Britney and Heather further stated that specific, practical help is especially valuable because it does not require them to follow-up and ask for the support:

Offering to help. Like offering to watch my kids if I need to, which never happens. But just, you know, just having that out there, just that if I need it, you know, it's there. Um just, um that's pretty much it. I have a neighbor that, she knows that he's gone, and she said you know, 'If you need anything, you know where I'm at,' that type of thing. So, just offering to help, and it's pretty much up to me to take them up on it...I've had a lot of people say, you know, 'Just give me a call or, you know, just let me know if you need this, that or the other.' But I don't always want to do that 'cause I feel bad or I feel guilty, or you know and so I think that if my friend were, or if someone were to come over here and say, 'Let me mow the lawn for you.' Or, you know, just, 'Let me take the kids to the park so you can have a couple of minutes.' Or, you know, just instead of saying that they will do it, if you need it, it's like, just assume (#23; 502-506, 649-654).

Very practical things. It would be practical help, also like you know, offer to bring you dinner one night so you don't have to cook for the kids. But also I've thought if it's very specific offers rather than, 'I'd like to mow your grass sometimes,' say, 'I'm going to be mowing grass Saturday, I'd like to come over and do it then.' That way it's not on me to call you and say, 'Hey I need my grass mowed,' you know. Or say, 'I want to bring you dinner one night this week, what's good for you?' (#08; 816-821).

### *Informational Support*

Finally, informational support, or offering information and advice, was also helpful in some cases. Women appreciated when their husbands offered different perspectives and insight. For example, some women valued their husbands' willingness to provide their opinions and help make choices about parenting, the house, or other issues from afar. Frances and Anette appreciated practical advice and opinions their husbands provided:

He's trying his best to support me from over there...Um, like whenever he gives me his opinion and tell me that I'm doing a good job. Even when he asks, even when he asks, just asking shows me that he really cares and is supporting me. And when he gives me his opinion, how I could do things different, like sometimes I even tell him, ya know, 'What I don't want to call them. Why don't you call them?' And he's going to do it. He calls them if I don't want to. So he's supporting me (#12; 448, 450-454).

Like when she's getting upset and she's starting to cry and rolling all over the floor and I don't really know how to get that rid of her, so she's not doing it no more, and he's like, 'Why don't you try this, why don't you try this,' stuff like that. I mean he don't really know either, but he's just giving me advice and like, 'Go ahead and try it, maybe it works,' stuff like that (#13; 135-138).

Riley and Stacey reflected on more emotional advice their husbands provided:

And so, you know, if I'm bringing a situation to him, and saying, 'You know what, I just don't know what to do,' or 'I'm really sad about this,' or something. He's like, 'You know what? It's ok to be sad, but this is how I would look at it.' And I'm like, 'Oh, hmm, maybe I should start looking at it that way.' You know, just bring a different perspective. And it kind of helps, it pulls us out of that rut that we're in (#05; 423-427).

He does help me figure myself out, which is good. I'll call him sometimes and I'm like, 'Look honey I need to talk to you about this. This is what's going on with your mom. And I know how I am; I analyze things. I read too much into it. Like I need you to tell me if this is reasonable or not 'cause this is exactly what I'm seeing. But this is how I'm understanding it.' And it's like, 'Well, I think she was just making a joke.' You know, stuff like that (#24; 544-548).

Although informational support could be constructive from husbands, women did not mention this type of support as functional coming from other people in general. Some mentioned they would actually be offended if people told them what to do, especially with their husbands, so it appears advice may not be the most helpful support coming

from most people. However, another group of people who were able to offer advice and information as support was other military wives. These other military women had various qualities that made them the most supportive resources for these wives. As such, they are described in detail below.

### *Support from Understanding Others*

Family, friends, coworkers, and husbands were valuable sources of the aforementioned support, yet overwhelmingly these women relied on other military spouses for a variety of support specifically pertaining to deployment. When wives mentioned “people who understand” or people who have “been there done that,” I asked them to expand on why these people are particularly helpful for them. They provided a variety of explanations.

### *Understanding*

To provide a brief background into this unique and contextual source of support, wives relayed their experience during deployment as totally different, and even incomprehensible, to those who have never experienced it. Not only is the experience of deployment beyond understanding, so is the world or culture of military wives, including a different sense of what is important. Although the deployment experience may be incomprehensible to outsiders, military spouses share awareness with each other. They have “been there done that” and share common ground. As such, military spouses then become helpful sources of support because they can understand and relate to each other’s experiences and sacrifices. This context for the support from other understanding others

will be represented throughout this section, but to provide a few salient examples,

Heather, Andie, and Jolene said,

The civilian friendships are sometimes hard because they don't seem to notice what's going on in the world. Um, and my sense of what's important is a lot different right now than what somebody else's sense of important is. You know, I know what's going on in the war... Which is why it's important to have other people who are going through it at the same time because they know that sense of distraction and, I don't know, it's not that you sit around and have a pity party together or feel sorry for each other. It's just you know, 'We're doing this and we're gonna make it and it's going to be alright and I know it sucks. And when I'm having a bad day I'll call you and when you're having a bad day you call me.' And it's not, I mean truly the constant level of fear and worry that you have is incomprehensible until you do it (#8; 691-694, 696-702).

I feel like him and I, we have like our own little world and like no one can understand it. So it's hard to really explain it to my friends that have known me for years, but I'm different now, 'cause like, you know, we have our own thing (#17; 712-714).

As far as support, yes, I just kind of stick with the people that have been through it and that know. And it's kind of been, not an inside joke, but it's something that we all have a communal understanding of that people, in laws and outlaws and whoever you want to call them, and you know, friends and family, they care, and

we respect that, but they don't understand in the same way we understand or deal with it (#19; 1046-1051).

### *Relating and Reciprocating*

It is clear that these spouses share a profound experience together, so why is this shared experience so helpful in terms of working through the challenges associated with deployment? First, military spouses feel they offer each other unique support, in addition to the more general support mentioned in the previous section. They can share experiences and specifically relate with each other. This sharing helps normalize the experience for military spouses, letting them know they are not the only ones going through it. And perhaps more importantly, they are able to see and learn from others who are going through the experience and handling it well. Averi and Jolene explained relating as a form of peer support:

You know when you're with them, you know that someone else is going through the same thing, and there's a comfort in that. And also there's a comfort in seeing them go through it and be strong. Knowing that well, if she can do it, I can do it too; we can do it together. Let's see, yeah I think, I guess I was just naturally drawn towards, and it was usually the topic of conversation a lot. But even when it wasn't, like oh I know, people when I wasn't with military wives, um, the fact that the deployment would be on my mind all the time and anything else seemed irrelevant and not important (#18; 696-702).

I think we use a lot of humor. A lot of tough love with each other, and it's just kind of like, well it's either, 'I'm here and I'll be supportive' or it's, 'I'm not

gonna take your crap and you need to snap out of it,' or it's just funny, like, oh, or like we compare, like comfort food, like, 'Oh, well I sat on my couch today and just watched Law and Order all day and ate like a pint of ice cream,' and someone else is like, 'Well I ordered a large pizza and I sat in my bed and I watched Sex and the City and I ate that whole thing by myself.' And it's just kind of like, all the sudden, you forget what you're upset about and you just start laughing because you both gained five pounds (#19; 1148-1155).

Heather also mentioned how being able to relate her experiences with others' helped normalize her feelings:

Just knowing that other people have been through it and are going through it. Just having the mutual understanding helps because you know your brain does crazy things to you when you're in this situation, and you think you might not be normal. And to find out that other people are experiencing the same things just really helps. It makes you say, 'Oh ok well yeah it is kind of out there, but everybody else out there feels this too,' and that makes it a little bit normal and we're going to be ok and we'll get through it (#08; 396-401).

Furthering this idea of relating to each other, when talking about deployment and military life, spouses feel they don't have to explain themselves with other military spouses. There is an innate understanding, so they can spend less time explaining the situation and interpreting the experience before having a conversation or just hanging out. Then, during the conversation, they are also able to elicit the right responses and questions from other spouses. More specifically, military spouses do not tend to complain

about un-relatable (and often perceived as petty) experiences and show pity the way civilian spouses do. In sum, in support eliciting situations, other military spouses don't have to pretend to understand the experience, which can be perceived as offensive, because they *do* understand the experience. Anette, Maddie, and Taryn illustrated these ideas well:

They know what they're talking about. Like, they know what I'm talking about and if I would go to someone who let's say is not married to someone in the Army, they don't really know what I'm talking about. Like even those short cuts for things like BAH or DOI or all that, they don't know what that is, so it's good to talk to people who know what I'm talking about...Military people are more understanding. And civilians, they keep asking me questions, 'How can you do this? I couldn't imagine.' It's just a phase we have to live with. Army is just a job. Civilians they're more like um like more curious, like how I can do it, and Army people kinda treat me normal 'cause they know what I'm talking about (#13; 355-358, 404-407).

Civilians don't get it as far as, you know, the things that we go through. They think we get everything for free, and it's a glorified welfare, or you know, what have you, which is so not the case. It's either you can be or you can't be a military spouse. Not just Army but military. So it's easier to talk with somebody who's gone through it 'cause then you don't feel like you have to reaffirm yourself. You can I can just tell her, 'Mom I'm having a day.' And she's like, 'Alright baby

what's going on?' And I'll tell her. If you tell that to somebody else, they're just like, 'Oh whatever, just get over it' (#22; 736-742).

[Civilians] don't understand where you're coming from and to tell you the truth, we don't understand where they're coming from. You know, like we have totally different lives and it's hard for us to hear them complain about certain things and then we're like oh boo, you know, but on the other hand it goes the same way, you know like I don't know like we just don't understand each other on that level (#09; 781-785).

Kari and Shawna further discussed how they don't have to explain themselves with other military spouses and can get to the point of the conversation:

And then constantly trying to explain yourself is frustrating. Where? He's in Afghanistan. Where is that? Well, it's in Southwest Asia. And you know and he lost his conex. What's a conex? Well, it's a big box that had a stuff in it. Well, what kind of stuff? Well, his body armor. Well, what's that? OK, you know what I mean? So before you even get to tell them anything you're thinking or feeling, you have to set up the context and you know halfway through they don't really care anymore. Like that's how it is with my mom. They just, no idea. No clue. And that's a, so finding those friends that understand and that you don't feel like you get "the look". There's the look of like, 'Oh yeah you're husband is deployed, isn't he?' ... You elicit the right, you get the right responses from your military friends (#14, 622-630, 636).

Because they know exactly what's going on, and you don't have to first go over like, 'Ok so this is where he is, and this is what he does and blah, blah, blah.' You can just go in to how you're feeling about it (#15; 416-418).

Based on these parallel experiences, and the ability to relate and understand each other, military spouses also rely on each other and offer reciprocal support. In other words, one person does not have to feel like the burden or the crutch; they are able to lean on each other in a time of need. As Kari and Pamela concluded,

I think it's because you don't feel like you're a burden on them...So having that parallel of today was such a bad day. I know what bad days feel like. Today was such a good day. I know what good days feel like. It's like having that same terminology of, and like coaching each other through a parallel as opposed to sometimes with other friends it seems like a perpendicular. And when you're with those girls, it's nice because you can not think about it. But I tend to gravitate more to someone who I can help, and they can help me as we move forward, otherwise you feel like this burden (#14; 612, 616-621).

It's more like Forest Gump, where you lean on me and I'll lean on you, and we won't have to sleep with our faces in the rain. Yeah, it's more that. Whereas, with his mom it's just like, ok I have to hold you up. Not let's hold each other up (#16; 1007-1009).

### *Informational Support*

In addition to unique support capabilities, other military spouses offer more specialized information and advice. They are excellent sources of information and

knowledge for each other, and the advice they give is particularly helpful because it relates better to the specific lived experience of deployment. Jenn, Renee, and Clair provided examples of informational support:

I have a friend Becky that was there in England, and she's been an Air Force wife for 12 years, and she was just like the encyclopedia of spouses. Like you had an issue with it, she knew the solution because she'd been there and done that (#10; 482-485).

And so actually finding them has been a great support cause most of them have been doing this for long enough they can at least point you in the right direction as far as who to look at on your own post or whatever, so they're a great source of information and support because they're all doing the same thing too (#03; 472-475).

So yeah for those people who've been there done that, they're definitely people to go to just to say, 'Hey this is what I'm going through, you know what I'm going through, tell me how you did it! I need to know! What's the secret?' (#11; 503-505).

When asked what specific information these other military wives are able to give, there was a broad range of advice. Frances, Renee, and Shawna reported,

I have for example one friend, she knows a lot about the army and the army life because she did it for a long time. I ask her if I have questions about assignments or taxes, I asked her questions about taxes this morning. She knows pretty much everything so I do not even have to go to the next step because I know the

information she gives me is right. That's what I use the most, and personal information, too, how they feel, how they dealt with it (#12; 308-312).

I guess just the, 'Stay busy, stay busy, find things to do. Keep your kids busy.'

And again the, 'Don't dwell,' you just, and don't, another one and this one I can see where especially at one point in time there, but they're like, 'Don't watch the news, don't even watch the news because whatever comes on there is nothing you can do about it anyway. As long as nobody shows up at your door, you're good.'

But they say, 'Just don't watch the news' (#03; 564-568).

[My friend] has been doing it only a month longer than me but it still seems like she's got more of a system going. So, you know, she gave me lots of good ways that we can communicate in terms of Skype and g-chat and all sorts of things that I hadn't really thought of, so it's good to hear those things. Just basic solid advice (#15; 490-493).

Support from understanding others gave women a sense of normalcy. Military wives were able to relate to each other, support each other, and learn from each other. Emma and Pamela helped summarize the many benefits of this contextual form of peer support:

You need someone who can be your battle buddy and if you just relied on your normal group of friends to be your battle buddy, which is great, that's fine, a lot people choose to do that, but they don't know really what you're going through. They don't have a spouse or a family member or a friend or whatever who's in the same position as your spouse, so you need to network within the community that your husband is, you know, so it helps you... They can give you sound advice

because they've been there done that...I guess you could say that the number one thing is experience. They've been there, and they know. But I think also because they live the Army life, they have a lot of the same benefits as you. They have a soldier who's deployed. It's almost like your more likely to bond because your soldier is deployed than if you just had a normal friend because um it's because that spouse that you really rely on someone more. And if two people rely on each other more, then they're more likely to help each other out (#20; 675-680, 731, 735-740).

You've got your friends and then you've got your Army friends. And there's a big difference there between the Army and the civilian world. Like my friends, they're great, I can call them when I'm sobbing and they can calm me down in a second, especially [Name]. But, whenever I'm really frustrated and I need to just rant about it, I can't call them because they don't understand. I mean I can, but I mean they cannot relate to it in any way really because their husbands are right there. And they're like well, and [Name] will be like, 'Well yeah [my husband] went on a three day business trip the other week, and I just missed him so much.' And then I just want to punch you in the face. Three days? Come on! Three days? Seven months! You know? So that's why, you know, it's really hard to be able to talk to non-Army friends, you know civilians, I hate using that term, than it is talking to somebody that's actually going through a deployment or has gone through a deployment...And this Army wife only has other Army wives. Me as an Army wife really only have other Army wives that totally get it, they totally know

how to react, you know, in different situations, and especially if you get within your company, or within your battalion, they know what is specifically going on. They know what their husband's going through, they know what's going on in that company, they know what's going on in this battalion, they know what's going on at the very moment, so again it's just that knowledge that you don't get as a civilian (#16; 860-870, 992-998).

Supportive responses from friends, family, husbands, and military wives served a variety of functions for women. To summarize, many forms of support (e.g., interaction, recognition and appreciation, emotional support, activities and invitations, relating, understanding, and reciprocating) helped women cope with the emotional demands of deployment, especially sadness and loneliness. Other forms of support (e.g., instrumental and informational support) were helpful in addressing more behavioral demands placed on women during deployment. For example, instrumental support was extremely valuable in that women knew they did not have to do everything on their own. They could get help with childcare, dinner, shopping, or other demands that often built up while their husbands were gone. In addition to the military and personal resources, and supportive responses, mentioned above, women discussed several other sources of support that helped them deal with the emotional and behavioral demands of deployment.

#### *Additional Sources of Support*

##### *Supporting Others*

Although women recognized they often needed to reach out and seek support from people, some noted that returning support was also helpful. Women often helped

other military wives, friends or family, but some also mentioned it was their role as a military wife to support their husbands. Maddie and Averı mentioned supporting others as a form of support:

I tend to be the one, ‘It’s gonna be ok, it’s gonna be alright,’ you know? There are times where she’s done that for me, but I take on the more, like I said, big sister role. ‘It’s gonna be alright.’ Giving her new ideas. Things to do with the kids to help with the deployment. Um, how to help get her husband in line, you know? Helping her assert herself. You know, things of that nature...I’m the big sister, I always have been. I’m more apt to help somebody else out more than I help myself. Does that make sense? ‘Cause it’s what I do; I’m a mom (#22; 712-716, 718-720).

Well I taught at a military school. That kind of made a difference for me too in some ways. Because so many of my kids parents left when my husband left. And I kind of felt like we were all going through the same thing, you know?...I was like I’m gonna take this time to ask the kids what they are going through and some how feel better through that. You know? I mean, you know, it was good for them too. But I was like, ‘How are you feeling? Do you want to write about it? What did you say to your dad before he left?’ You know, stuff like that. So that was nice and in some ways that supported me too (#18; 909-911, 921-925).

Jolene and Makenna also discussed how supporting others, including their husbands, made the deployment easier for their families:

I think that kind of doing things for [my husband] and doing things for [my daughter], really help me to like get through it too. It's really not about me this time. It's more about the FRG and [my husband] and [my daughter], and it's easier that way (#19; 801-803).

I just made sure to take care of everything. I knew kind of what he'd want anyway, so it was just easier that way. He didn't have to worry about it. I felt like that was my job as his wife to take care of everything so he wouldn't have to, so that kind of thing matters too. Doing what I can to take care of him. It goes both ways, that's marriage (#01; 669-672).

It made women feel good to be able to help other people, including their husbands. As aforementioned, in terms of the supportiveness of understanding others, women did not want to feel like a burden on others. Offering support to people, rather than just requiring it, likely helped women feel they were paying their friendship (and spousal) dues and not being emotional leeches on their friends and husbands.

### *Support by Proxy*

Second, and adding to this notion of supporting others, wives discussed how others who helped their husbands were also supportive to them. This support by proxy most often came in the form of sending boxes and letters to the soldiers, but also through showing support for the military and troops at home. These women felt that others sending boxes and supporting their husbands added to feeling appreciated; it also took some of the burden off of them. If other people could send support, it was one less thing

they had to do. Averi, Frances, and Kristin appreciated the support others offered their husbands:

Getting my husband's address and actually writing him a letter and saying thank you...I think because I care about him and I love him and I feel like so much of what he does is being unrecognized. And I feel like, also, I don't know, like I'm putting in so much effort for this deployment and it's like, oh I know what it is—a part of it is that I do so much to give him encouragement. Like especially when he first left, 'I'm so proud of you for what you're doing for the country. You're awesome, you're amazing, you are in like a jail and a hell hole. You're so brave, you're so courageous.' I mean I wouldn't say it like that. I would say it a lot more sincerely, and I'd beef it up a little bit. But, you know, like I'd give him so many words of encouragement and support. It's like when other people do that I feel like they're helping me help him, you know? It's like they're joining me in the effort to help him (#18; 1090-1091, 1101-1110).

I know there are pages where you can donate something for the soldiers over there. I know they love mail. You know, if you just send a post card, it's like showing them there are people there...Because it shows me that there are people there that care...Because we do so much for it. We don't have a husband around, we sacrifice so much, and there are people there who do care and so we know it's not for nothing. So that's the reason...It is good to know there are people who support your husband doing his job. You know you could lose so much; it's good

to know that there are other people caring about it (#12; 491-493, 497, 500-501, 504-506).

When my Dad passed away my friends stepped up and they took over all the packages, and sent me emails saying, ‘Don’t worry about him, we have it covered’...That helps me, and that makes me feel better...I know that he’s taken care of (#06; 848-850, 855, 867).

Supporting their husbands was important to women, so help they received in doing this took some of the burden off of them. At the same time, showing support for their husbands (and the troops, in general) conveyed appreciation for the family’s sacrifices, which women also found validating and supportive.

#### *External Sources for Support*

However helpful friends, families, husbands, and other military wives were, some wives still sought other sources of support. Several wives discussed how religion and church groups were supportive resources during deployment. Others sought professional help. Many also turned to organized online resources for additional support. Online resources included websites, such as [militaryonesource.com](http://militaryonesource.com), chatrooms, blogs, and other groups. In some cases these online sources led to more interpersonal sources for support (i.e., locating friends online but then meeting in person) or professional resources (i.e., finding counselors online). Other times, the anonymity of the Internet gave women an outlet for sharing their feelings and experiences or gaining perspective from others’ circumstances. Jolene’s therapist offered her a space for adult interaction and problem solving:

I go talk to him about just nothing usually. Just to go and have an hour of adult time, where I get to talk about adult things uninterrupted, you know? But, so he kind of keeps me sane because even when I have my friends over, it's kids. It's always kids, you know...So, that's my adult time without kids, and just to get, you know, talk my way through some of my own problems (#19; 772-776).

Danielle mentioned how her family's faith is a comfort for her husband during deployment:

We are a religious family. So I know that he does pray about the things we should do... And otherwise I put my faith in the Lord and I know that [my husband] will, he'll let me know when he's on the ground (#26; 202, 785-786).

Riley and Andie discussed using online supportive resources:

But I can't rave enough about military one source. They've really been there for me when I've needed, you know somebody to talk to, 'cause I'd be going through a crisis moment 'cause my husband is irritating me. We're approaching a deployment and there's stress, and school, and I can't handle it (#05; 567-570).

There's a website that I've gone on to, what is it called? It's militarySOS.com. Have you heard of that?...And it's all about military spouses. And there's message boards on it, and I've only posted on the message board once and I got like some really helpful responses. And I read, I read a lot of other people's stories on it...I felt it was really good to get those anonymous responses that read my situation and were supportive and forgiving and also helped me realize like other people had done this and gotten past it. So, it's a good website (#17; 403-408, 464-466).

Technology was a valuable resource in many ways for women. It offered these sources of support, and it also provided a way for women (and children) to keep in contact with their husbands. As Andie concluded,

I think, you know, the best thing [the military] can do is invest in the communication, and the private communication. The fact that it was in his room, you know, and it was just me and him, you know, we would hang out, we'd watch um, we could like watch TV together, or, you know, it was nice. So I think technology can help ease a lot of the deployment pain (#17; 616-620).

It is clear that although some women expressed a desire for solo navigation through deployment, a variety of supportive resources—military, personal, and external—were sought and utilized. Many responses women received from other people were extremely supportive in helping them cope with the emotional and behavioral demands of deployment. However, other resources and responses were not supportive for women. These unsupportive, and sometimes hurtful, resources and responses are discussed below.

### Unsupportive Resources and Responses

#### *Lack of Community and Military Resources*

Unsupportive responses were often tied to too little of the aforementioned supportive resources and reactions (e.g., on-post resources, recognition, conversation, activities). In general, a lack of community and good resources posed additional deployment challenges for military wives, as they felt more alone while dealing with the deployment. In some cases, however, even available resources were often unused because

the women felt they were unhelpful, hard to reach, or required giving up too much time. So, although resources (especially military resources) had the potential of being supportive, they were unused and as such did not reach their supportive capability.

Shawna and Andie made sense of this under-utilization:

I mean there's the FRG, which because I'm far away it is hard to get involved in I think. They have I mean it seems like they always have activities for, he's in the [Unit], every month they have like coffees and all sorts of, like this month they went bowling and throw people baby showers and all sorts of fun things but they're always at like 6:00 on like a Thursday night, and I'm like there's just no way. I'm exhausted and I've been at work for nine hours (#15; 279-283).

I think it's different for me, being in school and being consumed in my own life, you know, I don't think I really have time. They hold events and stuff, but I've never gone to any of them, but, you know, I have a really busy life, so, although CSI Saturday night, maybe not. But in general, in general I have a lot of homework, and I have a lot of obligations, and I don't feel the need. I think maybe if I had a family I would do more stuff like that (#17; 389-394).

Makenna desired military resources, but she did not feel there were any that related to her needs:

For me a lot of it's frustrating because I don't have kids and a lot of it is family oriented, and it just doesn't apply to me. One of my little frustrations is that as a spouse that is without kids sometimes it is hard to find stuff. It's good that there is

so much family oriented things out there, but at the same time it's hard because you get somebody like me that is like, ok, you know (#01; 758-762).

A lack of military and community resources, or the inability to access those that were available, was unhelpful and often frustrating for women. In terms of more personal resources (e.g., friends, family, coworkers), even when available and accessed, they too were not always supportive. These women felt people's responses were unhelpful or insensitive when they involved inappropriate comments and questions, rumors and gossip, assumptions and lack of awareness, comparing and complaining, and pity.

### *Unsupportive Responses*

#### *Inappropriate Comments and Questions*

First, inappropriate comments and questions were assessed based on content as well as frequency and timing. In terms of content, unsolicited advice and remarks made women feel annoyed or uncomfortable. Unsolicited advice often pertained to the way they should behave during deployment, their husbands' jobs, and parenting. Insensitive remarks ranged from "thank you," which a few women found awkward, to defeatist comments, such as "I would just die if I had to do that." Also, obvious questions (e.g., Are you afraid he's going to die?, Do you miss him?, Has he killed anyone?) as well as too many questions or too strong reactions (especially negative) were unhelpful and insensitive. These inappropriate responses were considered problematic not just because they were annoying and rude, but also because they brought negative feelings of the deployment to the forefront for women. Drew recalled unsolicited advice, and too much of it:

I've been in situations in before that I wish that people would've not given me as much advices. I'd be like ok enough is enough... That would probably be the biggest thing. You know, people give advice all the time on what they think that [my husband's] career should be, or his staying in, or things like that, or you should tell him to do this or you should tell him to do that. Well, you know what, it's up to him (#07; 921-923, 926-928).

Stacey and Jolene recalled many inappropriate comments and questions:

Every time, she'll say things like, 'So, what are you doing this week?' And I'm like, 'Oh I'm going to work, I'm working late,' whatever. She'll be like, 'Well at least it'll keep you out of trouble.' I'm like, 'Hah, yeah.' I'm like, 'I wanna punch the screen. I want to strangle you.' I'm a good wife, I am not the typical. Why do I have to prove, you know, why is it that marriages these days, you have to prove that you're a faithful good wife? (#24; 182-186).

It bothers a lot of people when people say to us, 'Well I could never do what you do.' I, you know, 'I could never do what you do.' But you just do. You grow up and you do it. You have no other choice. What are you gonna do? Sit in bed for a year and become the world's largest person? Eat your ice cream? I've got a child, I can't do that, you know? You just do it. You're capable of it; you just choose not to. These people choose not to. They don't have to deal with it but only for a week, so they choose not to... When people ask, 'Do you miss your husband?' Do you breathe air? You know, yes. Would you miss your husband? Or 'Do you worry about him?' Or I can tell you real fast, I know this is off topic but one thing

that I can't stand people asking my husband when he comes home is, 'Have you killed somebody?' Probably...So I cannot stand, and this is something that with this deployment if someone asks my husband I will probably have to say something if not literally slap that person in the face. It's just completely inappropriate, you know, it's not, if you're a waitress do you serve food? It's part of your job, you know? Yes, he probably has. He's not a cook (#19; 940-945, 1090-1093; 1125-1128).

Heather and Frances reflected on their own reactions to inappropriate or awkward comments and questions:

Usually it's, 'Ghasp! I don't know how you do it.' And, 'Gosh I just I couldn't do it,' and 'You must be so strong.' I don't know it's not anything with bad intent or bad anything, it's just very strange and uncomfortable. Or 'Thank your husband for what he does' or, 'Thank your family,' and so I end up half crying...If somebody comes up and talks to you about it and they seem like they want to talk about it, that's fine, but don't immediately like, 'Ghasp!,' don't get excited, don't start a barrage of questions, and for God sakes don't ask if he's killed somebody, 'Has your husband ever killed anybody?' I swear...Yeah, people ask, yeah. 'Oh my gosh, what if he dies?' People ask horrible things. 'Aren't you afraid he's going to die?' Oh no, this is a cake walk. I don't worry about that at all. Thanks for bringing it up (#08; 799-802, 919-922, 925-927).

Sometimes like when they have kids and the kids are like, 'Ok so is your husband ever coming back?' You know sometimes people say something that make you

feel like he's not, it's kind of hard. You know, but it's a kid, but sometimes you hear older people saying something like, 'Oh yeah I hope he's coming back.' And you're like thank you for saying that (#12; 412-415).

These questions and comments were particularly unhelpful when communicated in inappropriate times and places, including in front of the children. As Taryn recalled, All three of my kids are standing right there and the clerk asked me, 'Oh is your husband deployed?' And I said, 'Yeah,' and they're asking me, 'Where is he?' Does he, you know is he just asking me very specific questions about being in Iraq, and I'm just kind of looking at my kids like, 'NO goodbye,' you know? I'm not going to, like, 'Oh are you worried about him?' They're standing right here. Well, obviously I'm worried about him, but I'm not going to say that in front of my kids, you know? It was just, the questions were I guess something that he didn't really consider to be inappropriate, but from my standpoint, it wasn't they weren't particularly helpful questions, so I think um sometimes civilians see it from the outside and um don't really understand the reality of the situation (#09; 813-821).

Combined, these comments and questions made women feel awkward and uncertain because they were forced to think about the deployment and the frightful events and feelings that came with it. Inappropriate questions and comments also showed a lack of recognition of the women's circumstances, and most found recognition especially helpful during deployment.

### *Rumors and Gossip*

While civilians tended to be the people who made inappropriate remarks and asked inappropriate questions, military wives' interactions were not totally benign either. Rumors and gossip amongst the wives caused unnecessary drama that could reach all the way back to the soldiers. Unfortunately women attributed much of this gossip to the Family Readiness Groups, which were intended to provide support. Some wives noted FRG leaders were attempting to change this reality, or stereotype, so the groups would be a space for positive reflection and support rather than complaints and rumors. However, many were still skeptical of FRGs' effectiveness. Makenna and Heather informed,

Every unit's got an FRG. It's like the communication network for the spouses... Those can be good and bad. Some FRGs have dissolved into rumor mongering and gossip, and there's a lot of horror stories about it. A lot of Army guys don't trust FRGs because there has been a lot of bad experiences with either spouse's that are gossiping or spreading rumors or you know, it's women... Either gossip and rumors about the unit, other spouses, stuff going on. It's like the bad desperate housewives. Sometimes it can just be all that (#01; 737-738, 739-743, 745-746).

A lot of people don't like to take be part of the FRG because there's, I mean anytime you get a group of very stressed women together, there can be bad things that happen. So a lot of them have been burned in the past. So I have to work very hard to try to get people involved and to use our, to use us, because they've either

been burnt or their soldier doesn't want them involved, or who knows (#08; 613-617).

Emma reflected on her original feelings about FRGs and gossip in general:

Before I even came here I never was part of an FRG. Um, I've always associated them with gossip groups because that's how they were in [Base] when women would just get together and run the gossip mill. So I don't like gossip, I think it gets you nowhere, it's just a waste of time, and some people just do it. No matter what you tell them, no matter what you say, they'll always gossip, so I didn't want to be a part of that. So yeah, I didn't. I didn't want to join it, but then I realized after meeting [the FRG leader] that it was going to be a good thing, so I quickly jumped on board, and it has been very helpful (#20; 716-722).

Rumors and gossip only added more drama to an already problematic situation, so these women wanted to avoid it. Because FRGs were a source for these rumors and gossip, as the women all knew each other and each other's husbands, many women did not want to be a part of the FRGs. This helps explain why this military resource (intended to support military spouses) remains under-used.

#### *Assumptions and Misconceptions*

Third, people who made assumptions and showed a lack of awareness and respect also made women feel bad. These types of reactions, like the inappropriate comments and questions above, made women feel a lack of recognition from others, and they also took away the significance of their families' sacrifices. Some particularly unhelpful statements that represented misconceptions and a lack of awareness and respect included, "You

chose this” or “The soldier’s death was ridiculous.” It was disheartening to many of these women that the general public did not seem to understand or care about the wars overseas. They also felt that people’s assumptions about the military were inaccurate and often discriminatory. Averil and Heather expressed how a lack of awareness and erroneous assumptions were unsupportive and frustrating:

I’m like walking around going through this huge sacrifice for our country that has no clue. So, you know? And they’re completely ignorant. And I wish there was just more awareness. Not so that I can receive sympathy, but just so that I feel like what I’m going through has value, you know? And like this, it’s not gonna be this forgotten war, you know? So and for my husband’s sake too you know? He’s not just fighting a war for the generals and George Bush. He’s fighting a war for the country and the country knows he’s doing it you know? You want to be appreciated (#18; 1043-1048).

You know a little more awareness would go a long way. Because that makes me a little bitter; it makes a lot of the soldiers bitter too...It’s much more complicated than what people assume. So any type of comments that involve politics of any sort are not welcome, just because yeah, there’s so many assumptions (#08; 838-839, 902-904).

Makenna and Pamela also illustrated varying viewpoints on the unsupportive nature of assumptions and misconceptions:

It’s hard when you don’t have anybody else who can *really* understand. I’ve had people tell me, ‘Well, you know, you chose this.’ And I’m like, ‘Well, yeah, I

chose the military, but that doesn't make it any easier'... They were trying to get me to deal with it, that is what they were trying to do. I know the intention was, but for some reason it didn't make me feel better (#1; 92-94, 96-97).

I guess the worse reaction I can get, and this makes me want to punch you in the face, and I'm not that violent of a person, is 'Oh wow, I just, I can't wait to see this war over, it's just such a pity that those guys have to go over there.' And that really angers me because like I talked about in the feelings, it's a wonderful thing. Like we feel great doing this. We know we're doing the right thing. We know that, as a family, our sacrifice actually means something. And to me, when you say things like, 'Oh well they shouldn't even be over there, it's not even helping anything, and da, da, da, da, da,' you're demeaning what we sacrifice so much for... And it's just for you to say that his death was ridiculous is just I mean, because he signed on that dotted line, he took an oath that he would die for this country, and you're saying that it's ridiculous. And I think what they meant was that it's ridiculous that soldiers have to die... But it didn't come off that way. I think that's what they were trying to say, but that's not what was said... It's a really hard reaction when you say that your husband's deployed and they think, you know, the bad things. So, you know, and they think what he's doing is not worth something, because it is, it's your freedom (#16; 1029-1036, 1056-1059, 1060-1064).

Maddie felt that misconceptions were more than unsupportive and angering. She thought they represented a general prejudice against military families:

I find it really annoying when they're like, 'Oh your husband's deployed, so you're for the war?' No. Then they're like, 'What?' And they get mad. 'Cause they automatically think that just because your spouse is in the military, oh you're pro war...Or being categorized, since I'm an Army wife, I must be like all the other ones that they hear about. You know, sleeping around or always in their husband's sweats, you know, just getting fat, not doing anything...I'm not lazy and I don't sleep around. I don't sit around whining and crying all day because I'm alone, my husband's gone. You know, basically, I consider that prejudiced for military families (#22; 836-838, 842-844, 845-847).

As implied in the above statements, people also sometimes shared their political views more specifically with the military wives. People's political views often opposed women's positions. But even more frustrating for the women, people's political comments carried with them assumptions about what the women believed about the wars and did not recognize the personal nature of the wars for the women. Many women said keeping the politics out of conversation was the best policy when trying to support military wives. Makenna and Heather said,

They're the 60s generation, you know, so they are totally against the Iraq war and all that. And I've got into arguments, and I try not to talk to them about that.

They're entitled to their opinion, but I've had my mom try to talk with me about the war and stuff like that, and I'm like, 'Mom, I love you but I get defensive.'

And she's like, 'Why do you get defensive?' I'm like, 'Because it's personal.' She doesn't understand that it's not just an abstract idea; it's personal. I mean I don't

know whether it is right or not that we are there. I don't want to except that my spouse has been gone for 14 months or a year for no good reason (#1; 118-124). [They] don't seem to grasp that everybody is different and we're not ya know I'm not sitting here wishing my husband was, I mean, I am hoping my husband comes home, but at the same time I believe in what he's doing, so I'm not like, not all of us want them to be pulled out immediately and sent home, and not all of us want them to stay over there for the next hundred years. It's much more complicated than what people assume. So any type of comments that involve politics of any sort are not welcome. Just because, yeah, there's so many assumptions (#08; 898-904).

Women recognized people's responses were perhaps not malicious in intent, but inappropriate comments, questions, and political discussions still showed a lack of awareness and appreciation that took away the significance of their soldiers' and their families' sacrifices. Overall, women did not want to be judged and disrespected because they were a part of the military, and they did not want their husbands to be judged for the jobs they were doing for the country.

#### *Complaints and Comparisons*

A fourth unhelpful response from others, which also likely stemmed from a lack of awareness and forethought, involved complaining and making invalid comparisons and assertions. General complaining and negativity was unhelpful. But many of these women found civilians women (even friends) complaining about having their husbands away for a few weeks, or days, extremely annoying and insensitive. Complaining,

making hasty comparisons, and pretending to understand showed a lack of consideration and reflection and invalidated the women's circumstances. Jolene and Anna shared examples of people's complaints and comparisons and their responses to these messages:

I am judgmental of the fact that people, or they think that they understand what military wives go through because their husband's or whoever have been gone for a week. 'Oh my gosh, I know what you're going through. My husband's been gone for a week and I miss him so much.' And I just want to slap them, and I'm not a violent person. I just want to slap them and shake them, and I hate saying that because I'm sure it doesn't make me look good but I just, how dare you say that to me. It's almost like you pay your dues, you know? And until you have, don't tell me that you know what it's like, you know? (#19; 947-953).

There's inherent dangers in deployment, and when people say who do not have any aspect of that touch them, 'Well you know I know what you're going through.' Well no, you really don't. You have no idea what it's like to wonder if you're husband's gonna step outside from getting breakfast and step on a bomb, or maybe burn in this horrible vehicle fire and be permanently disfigured. And that wouldn't change how I feel about him, but it's certainly gonna change how he feels about himself. But that's the least helpful, when people tell me that (#04; 371-376).

Erika also noted specific unsupportive complaints and comparisons she tried to avoid:

They'll complain about, 'Oh my husband is gonna be gone for the next couple of days, it's so sad.' And I just have to remove myself from the conversation 'cause

it makes me mad, I'm like, 'No, Don't complain to me about that, please just don't go there.' Or, 'My husband's gonna be gone for a week and a half, I don't know what I'm gonna do, I'm not gonna be able to sleep without him.' I'm just like, 'You get used to it! You get used to it after awhile.' And they'll complain about that kind of stuff, so I just kind of distance myself from those people 'cause it is just, it's a lot to handle (#02; 221-227).

### *Pity*

Finally, many women found that reactions of pity, also including expressions of fear and charity, were especially unhelpful. Pity was expressed both verbally (e.g., "I'm so sorry") and nonverbally. Many women noted "the look" they would get from people when they found out they had a deployed husband. These women were proud of their husbands and proud of themselves for serving the country and surviving hardship, so they did not want other people to feel pity for them. They also felt that expressions of pity required them to manage others' fears and uncertainty about the war and deployment. With all of their own fear and uncertainty, they did not want to carry the burden of other's emotions as well. Kari and Heather stated,

But when people say, 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.' Why? What's the point? That doesn't even help me. You know, what if you say, 'I'm not sorry.' I don't know. It just so that and then there's the look of like 'OH,' the concerned look of like, 'Are you doing ok?' Or like, 'Poor you.' And it's not poor me. I mean [he's] coming home at the end of the year and you know this will just be a blip on the little screen and so I do it to avoid that I'm sorry or like the sorry look, especially

when you feel like there is such a small percentage of people that actually, really care (#14; 688-694).

Civilians typically tend to pity you. When you talk to a civilian typically you see a ton of fear and ‘Oh my god’ in their eyes, you know what I mean?...I don’t want to deal with somebody else’s fear. I don’t want to deal with somebody else’s pity, and I really don’t want to have to explain war to people (#8; 674-676, 706-707).

Maddie did not want people’s pity or their charity:

I’m a proud person. I don’t, don’t feel pity for me. I’m ok. You know, I’m alright. Like for instance when I took my son to go get a physical. And I had to do it at an independent doctor, and they found out that my husband was deployed. They didn’t charge me. I was a little bit offended. I know people are like, ‘Well it’s free.’ No, you know, they were like, ‘Oh we want to thank you for what your husband’s doing.’ And that’s great you’re being patriotic, but I’m just like everybody else, I’ll pay. You know, even though they refused. I’m like, ‘Alright, fine. Whatever.’ I don’t know, I just don’t like to dwell, and I don’t like people focusing on it because there’s more to me and my family than the deployment (#22; 766-773).

These various unsupportive responses from people (e.g., inappropriate comments and questions, rumors and gossip, assumptions and misconceptions, complaints and comparisons, and pity) had a clear, negative impact on women. They reported angry, annoyed, defensive, frustrated, and pseudo-violent (e.g., wanting to punch/slap people)

reactions. Many women recognized that people were not intentionally hurting them; however, this did not mean they had to like or accept the responses.

### *Unsupportive Responses from Husbands*

Most of the reported unhelpful responses came from friends and family, especially those not affiliated with the military. It should be noted that women did not mention a lot their husbands did that was unhelpful. A few exceptions were that women became frustrated if they felt their husbands were not giving back, were distracted while on the phone, or were stuck in their military role rather than their husband role. Some also wished their husbands would send something back home to show their love. Shawna and Pamela wished their husbands would send more expressions of love:

He's never been so good at you know, like the card, or you know, long emails or things like that, which I'd really like him to do more of (#15; 546-547).

I really wish he would write me a letter, like just one. I've begged him to and he won't do it. It's just his personality. And it's the fact that he has no time. I've even sent him like self-addressed stamped envelopes and he still won't take the time to write me a letter. Um, but I'm ok with it, I mean, he could really, if he would write me a letter, oh my God, I can't even describe how happy I would be (#16; 1230-1234).

Kari became frustrated when her husband could not separate himself from his military role:

And so in the very beginning I was like, 'Listen if you're going to send me some briefing memo about how your day went, just don't email me.' I'd rather wait

three days and get one from my husband and you know when military [husband] is nowhere to be found. That's what I used to call him at [University] 'cause I'd call him and he'd be like, 'This is Cadet [Surname].' And I'd be like, 'Hello Cadet [Surname], when [Name] is around, have him call me back.' So he'd be like, 'Ok, bye.' He'd call me back ya know in 10 or 15 minutes and be like, 'Hi!' It's like two different people. It's weird. And especially over there it's really hard for him to step back from what he's doing because he lives at work and he works at where he lives (#14; 152-160).

Alex thought that less distraction from her husband would be helpful:

The only thing that I would say that he could change maybe, would when I'm talking to him, not play video games sometimes. If he's had a stressful day, he'll play video games while I'm on the phone and that's kind of annoying. But that's more of a him thing than it is a deployment thing. So I really don't think there's anything else different that he could do. He's trying his hardest, and I mean I couldn't really ask anything more than what he's doing (#21; 805-810).

While some women addressed these few unsupportive actions from their husbands, generally women felt their husbands were doing pretty well in terms of supporting them. They recognized their husbands were in difficult environments, and many applauded them for doing everything they could to offer support. In cases where women were fed up with their husbands' inability to give support, they remained hopeful that things would change when they were back together again.

## Support Summary

Seeking support was a prominent coping strategy for women during deployment. In seeking support, women found military and personal resources. They also found other sources of support, including supporting others, support by proxy, and external resources. Different people offered various types of support for the women, all of which helped women cope with the emotional and behavioral demands of deployment. The general feeling behind support, coming from these women's responses, was that women wanted others to validate their choices, recognize their sacrifices, show understanding, and offer help and a space for interaction and enjoyment. Although the challenges of deployment were substantial, and the affective burden was great, women did not present themselves as emotional wrecks waiting for rescue. They learned to rely on people, and they often needed a pick-me-up, but the support they received was typically simple and organic rather than grand and dramatic. The impact of this simple support, however, should not be understated. A simple phone call, offer of assistance, shared experience, or "thank you," for example, could make a big difference in these women's experiences. This difference was visible when women shed tears of joy and appreciation while discussing supportive responses they received from people.

However, not all responses women received helped them cope with the challenges of deployment. Women also received unsupportive responses that made them feel underappreciated and invalidated. These unsupportive responses also produced additional negative affect for women, including feelings of fear, anger, and frustration. Many unsupportive reactions are likely not intentional, as women noted, but they still produce

additional demands for women. Fortunately, some women noted that supportive responses were more common than unsupportive responses. Women recognized the wars for which they were sacrificing were controversial, and they often avoided reactions from people whose responses they could not predict. This might explain why supportive responses were more common than unsupportive, as women knew the people they could count on for effective support.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

### Overview

The results of this qualitative analysis of women's experiences with spousal deployment, including coping and support, corroborate the stress and loss theories (i.e., FAAR model, ambiguous loss) and aspects of the deployment experience for families reported in the introduction. However, the results also provide greater depth of knowledge in terms of the various components of the FAAR model (i.e., stressful event, meaning, demands, capabilities) and ambiguous loss theory (i.e., ambiguous loss, boundary ambiguity), emphasizing the positive and negative aspects of deployment and drawing attention to the specific communicative coping strategies and resources women associate with deployment. This information helps further explicate the resilience process, especially in terms of developing a model that accounts for the subjective experience and transactional nature of stressful events, coping, and support in families.

The specific focus on communicative coping and support adds richness to our understanding of the transactional nature of the resilience process. In other words, people and families do not go through stressful events alone. First, we can see how family members work together to cope with stressful events (i.e., relational coping, family coping). Family coping resources, including cohesion, adaptability/flexibility, organization, and communication skills have been outlined in previous research (Patterson, 1988; Patterson, 2002). How families attain or maintain these resources, among others, is further explicated in this study. For example, women use emotion coaching to maintain a positive attitude about their experiences, and more specifically to

establish flexibility in terms of their situation, routines, and roles. Also, women work hard to preserve family cohesion, as they maintain the positive qualities of their own relationships with their husbands and children as well as their husbands' and children's relationships with each other. Women maintained positive aspects of their spousal relationships through online activities along with affection and positivity in their interactions. They attempted to make their relationships with their children more positive through engagement and attachment. And finally, they helped develop a sustained connection between their husbands and children through constant reassurance and information, mediated interactions, and paternal presence. All of these actions helped keep the family relationships close, even over the distance and time of deployment. Other relational and family coping efforts will be discussed in more detail in this chapter.

Second, along with the family and relational coping efforts, we can see from the current interviews how others respond to individuals experiencing stressful events and why these responses are interpreted as supportive or unsupportive. Previous literature on family stress reports sources of support (e.g., people at church, parents, friends, coworkers) as resources/capabilities (Patterson, 1988; Patterson, Holm, & Gurney, 2004). More specifically, informal sources (e.g., friends, family, neighbors), formal sources (e.g., agencies), and unit sources (e.g., military leaders, chain of command) were investigated as three major support categories in a study with military spouses during Persian Gulf wartime separation (Rosen et al., 2000). The current study empirically investigates women's perceptions of different responses from these potentially supportive sources and why different responses are supportive and/or unsupportive. Varied

evaluations of different support complicate our understanding of support, illustrating its contextual and dynamic quality. As Patterson (1988) concluded, network members can be a source of demand as well as a source of support. Therefore, understanding what responses are deemed supportive or unsupportive, within a given context, may be more important to theory and practice than knowing the people who offer them.

In this chapter, I will discuss in more detail how the current results help develop existing family stress and resilience theory and ambiguous loss theory. I will pay particular attention to the transactional nature of resilience, coping, and support. Looking at these women's narratives about deployment, it appears that resilience is more than balancing demands and capabilities; coping is bigger than resources and strategies. Resilience is a joint process between people experiencing stress and others who are simultaneously relating or reacting to the stressful event and the affected individual. This process involves constant interpretations of the experience, coping, and responses from others. In the current cases, resilience also requires integrating the negative and the positive aspects of the stressful life event and claiming life in the midst of what could be tragedy. As most women noted, there are bad days. These are days when they find themselves crumpled on the floor, weeping at the absence of their partners or wondering if they can make it through the deployment. However, most days life keeps going. They get up, they take care of the kids, they go to work, and they live life. Sometimes this takes conscious emotional or physical effort, and sometimes it is more unconscious. The actions they take in this process of claiming life rather than tragedy make up what we call coping. And while the specifics of the coping process can be divided into distinct

strategies or resources, the overall approach is simple yet profound. These women, faced with the stressful event deployment, “just do it.” They choose life; they choose their relationships; and they do so in many effortful ways, together and with the help of others.

### Transactional Model of Resilience

To organize these ideas I will follow a transactional model of resilience, adapted from the FAAR Model and based on the current data (See Figure 1). This model not only highlights the transactional nature of resilience; it also underscores subjective interpretations of deployment, coping, and responses from others. In other words, it illustrates resilience as a process that occurs individually and relationally and relies upon constant interpretation and re-interpretation of demands based on coping and the behaviors and responses from others. When asked to describe how they deal with deployment, women situated themselves within their relationships, their families, and their networks. They shared stories of working together with others, including their children and absent husbands, to cope during deployment. Theory needs to reflect how central these interactions and behaviors between people are to the process of resilience.

### *Stressful Event Experience and Meaning*

#### *Deployment Demands*

In line with the FAAR Model, and previous research on deployment, the current study describes many demands women face during deployment. These demands include normative and non-normative stressors or events of change, ongoing family strains or unresolved tensions, and daily hassles or disruptions, as outlined in previous literature (Patterson, 2002). Yet demands, or strains and disruptions specifically, did not exist only

within the confines of the individuals. When asked how deployment was influencing their lives, women reported many feelings and experiences spanning beyond themselves. Strains existed within the person (e.g., burden of control, situational uncontrollability, identity challenges, and negative affect), as well as the relationship (e.g., relational loss and hardship) and family (e.g., child maladaptation, decreased relationship quality, discipline/nurture challenges, and emotional contagion). In some cases, women felt the hardest thing about deployment was knowing their husbands were missing out on what was back home or their children were missing their fathers. This may be similar to a category of demands called family tasks of maintenance and development, which refers to demands associated with maintaining the family over time (Patterson, 1988). However, family and relational demands in the current data are more context-dependent. Women directly related relational losses and hardships to the deployment. Women also felt that child maladjustment, difficulties with parent-child relationships and parenting, and concerns about emotional contagion stemmed from the absence of the father/husband in the family. So although these demands are associated with maintaining the family unit, they are specific to deployment rather than associated with developmental transitions typical in families over time.

While women's other-orientation within their stressful life circumstances can be interpreted as unselfish, they felt they were a part of this system that deployment was deeply affecting. So although considering their husbands' and children's feelings is other-oriented and compassionate, others' feelings and experiences were entangled with the women's own feelings because they all affected the whole of the family system. For

example, when children miss their fathers or feel abandoned they begin to act out. This acting out then affects the daily business and climate of the family (e.g., mom then feels bad leaving children at daycare and thus has no time for herself). As another example, women felt busier during deployment because they were solely responsible for tasks around the house and with the children. They reported that being so busy often meant they had fewer opportunities to spend quality time with their kids. Without their husbands as backup, they also experienced challenges in their parenting. So while women reported many individual challenges, they were a part of a family system that was simultaneously affected by deployment. As such, coping follows a similar pattern. Women do not only cope as individuals; they cope as partners and as parents and as part of a family unit. Before discussing coping, however, it is necessary to talk about the positive aspects of deployment.

### *Deployment Benefits*

Women were plagued with various challenges during deployment, but they also reported positive personal and relational aspects of the experience, which need to be more firmly embedded in stress and resilience theory. Demands are often considered the by-products of the stressful event, whereas capabilities are actions and characteristics instrumental in balancing out those demands. However, the current data suggests that benefits, like stressors and strains, can also be part of the event experience. Within the self and the spousal relationship, positive aspects included empowerment, self-enhancement, positive affect, and relationship growth. Women's personal and relational growth during deployment corroborates previous research reporting positive change

following adversity, or adversarial growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Linley & Joseph, 2004). Linley and Joseph (2004) conclude that growth and distress may exist on two separate dimensions. In other words, they do not have to be negatively related; one can experience both growth and distress simultaneously, as illustrated in the current data. During deployment, women experienced both distress and growth, personally and within their relationships.

Notably, however, women did not report benefits within the family experience. Women did express the resilience of their children, who showed an ability to withstand the deployment period, but this involved perceptions of children's personal growth rather than family growth. Their reports of the family experience of deployment included child maladjustment, parenting and relationship challenges, and emotional contagion. This could be because in many cases women felt a sense of guilt about their children's circumstances and their own inability to make things better. They knew their children did not have a choice in being part of the military. Wives and their husbands made these choices, yet mothers felt their children were greatly affected. Women did not seem to feel the situation itself, or strategies taken to cope with it, provided benefits to the family as a whole. These benefits were limited only to the self and the spousal relationship. If the experience of adversarial growth may actually alleviate stress and aid adjustment to stressful events (Linley & Joseph, 2004), then understanding how to promote this growth in individuals, relationships, and families is especially important.

Researchers have found that some families develop positive meanings as a way to cope (Patterson & Leonard, 1994). The overlap between adversarial growth and positive

reinterpretation as a form of coping causes researchers to question the distinction between the two constructs (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Do people actually experience growth, based on the stressful event, or do they reinterpret their experiences as growth as a way to cope with demands? The assumption tends to be that there are no positive sides of stressful situations, but rather people reinterpret the negative as positive. This is illustrated by the focus on demands, risks, or challenges as part of the stressful event and positive reinterpretation as part of capabilities or coping strategies.

Evidence in the current data, however, supports positive reinterpretation and adversarial growth as two distinct constructs. Women not only reinterpreted the negative aspects of deployment; they also experienced some positive aspects. More specifically, women reinterpreted negative feelings and actively sought positive outlooks and feelings through positive self-talk, recognition of limitations, activity engagement, and enhanced flexibility and openness (i.e., emotion coaching). But they also reported benefits of the deployment itself, including personal and relational growth. As such, adversarial growth seems to be a potential outcome of the stressful event, rather than a coping effort alone. So yes, there can be growth from adversity, and coping efforts are intended to establish and/or maintain this growth as well as other benefits. For example, having time away from husbands promoted self-enhancement in terms of both social and personal development (stressful event benefit). Coping strategies such as seeking support and keeping busy likely contributed to this self-enhancement as a type of individual growth. Deployment also made women feel relationship growth because they and their partners took less for granted during deployment; they realized what they could lose (stressful

event benefit). Confronting this mortality together and upholding positivity and affection in their conversations were coping strategies that promoted these feelings of relationship growth. One might question the authenticity of women's reports of deployment benefits; questioning whether or not it is a façade women construct to convince themselves of benefits. However, if meanings made about event stressors (i.e., strains) are accepted as part of the stress experience, then so should be the meanings people make of events based on benefits.

Also supporting the distinction between adversarial growth and positive reinterpretation, adversarial growth only occurred within the individual and the spousal relationship. Yet positive reinterpretation, as a type of coping strategy, occurred personally (e.g., emotion coaching), relationally (e.g., positivity), and within the family (e.g., reassurance). If positive reinterpretation signifies the same construct as adversarial growth, we should see growth in the family experience, but even with much effort through coping, women did not feel this sense of growth within the family. Rather, they reported challenges with parenting and maintaining the relationships in the family as a whole.

Does this mean that family coping efforts were inconsequential if there was no reported family growth? No. It is likely that family coping efforts helped maintain understanding and adjustment in the family as well as individual family relationships (e.g., father-child, mother-child); but because one member of the unit was missing, the whole unit could not grow prior to the return. Family coping likely aids in the ease of this family reintegration, as attachments are kept in tact, making family growth come in later

stages of deployment. So over time the efforts women took to repair and maintain the family relationships may lead to adversarial growth, but it is not clear in the current data. In sum, resilience, as a process, does not always imply growing; it can mean maintaining the status quo and an ability to function during stressful events. As such, the resilience process (including positive and negative experiences, meaning, and coping strategies and resources) can promote this ability to function and maintain life, even with continued stress and sadness, as well as adversarial growth. The current study highlights the importance of communication in this process, which is developed further in the discussion of coping.

#### *Meaning Making and the Deployment Experience*

Demands and benefits are segmented in the proposed Transactional Model of Resilience (see Figure 1) by positive and/or negative interpretations or meanings made of the event. When taken as a whole, it appears that women are quite flexible in their meaning making. Interpretations of control and identity, for example, are interpreted as both positive and negative, as are emotional and relational outcomes. Within the interviews, this led to a lot of “yes, but...” statements. In other words, women would note a positive (or negative) interpretation followed by the opposite. For example, they might state how hard deployment can be for their relationship, but then note that in the end they will be stronger for it. On the other hand, they might attribute positive feelings to deployment, such as pride or happiness, but then note the negative feelings also present. Flexibility in their interpretations of deployment as a stressful event allowed women to see both the negative and positive aspects of deployment. This both/and perspective may

be especially helpful for women as they are dealing with deployment as an ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999; 2004; 2006; 2007)

In addition to finding the positive aspects of deployment, or reinterpreting the negative, during the interviews women consistently made two discursive moves that indicated ways they were able to make sense of their stressful circumstances. First, women often made sense of their own stressful event by way of what it was not. Women could certainly recognize the challenges of deployment and what made it stressful for them. However, they repeatedly identified other situations that would be worse than their own. If a husband was in Iraq, well, he *could be* in Afghanistan where it is less developed and perhaps more dangerous currently. If a woman did not have (or had) children, well, it *could be* worse if she had other people she needed to take care of (or was all alone). These are just two examples from the data, but the overall theme is that women recognized the plight of their fellow military wives, which sometimes helped them put their own challenges into perspective.

Second, women often reflected upon deployment as an obligation and a duty that came with being a part of the military culture. This ties closely to global meanings in that it takes into account the values and norms associated with being a part of the military (Patterson, 2002). Women also recognized that being a part of the military culture was a choice they made, so they had to live with the fact that deployment was a part of that life. So even in a situation that was mostly uncontrollable, women were able to find some control as they interpreted deployment as one aspect of a broader choice they had made to serve the country. Of course, however, deployment is a family stressor, and while

women could recognize their involvement in the military as a choice for themselves, they knew they were forcing the life upon their children. Some mothers felt guilty for doing this, but others referred back to “it could be worse,” noting that their children do not have it as bad as other children. Kristin and Taryn represent these two approaches to meaning making,

I mean it breaks my heart that she has to live like this. And she tells me all the time, I’ll never marry anyone in the military...She goes, ‘I won’t do it to my kids,’ and then I feel guilty too. I have a lot of guilt I guess, because I convinced him to stay in and this is how it ended up (#06; 302-303, 304-306).

I have a hard time feeling sorry for anybody, especially my own kids. I mean, just the other day we’re driving down the road, and she started that, ‘Oh I miss daddy, blah blah blah,’ and I just looked at her, and I’m like, ‘I don’t want to hear it, you know? You have a dad who loves you. Do you know how many people in this world don’t have a dad?’ (#09; 545-549).

Reflecting on the notion that things *could be worse* or that deployment was a *part of the job* and an aspect of military culture were two discursive meaning making moves that women made when making sense of their deployment experience. The ability to maintain a both/an perspective was also a valuable meaning-making approach for women, as they were able to recognize both positive aspects and negative aspects of deployment. Various meanings surrounding other coping behaviors and support will also be discussed throughout the next sections, as the interpretation of each dimension of resilience influences the overall process.

## *Coping with Stressful Events in Families*

### *Personal Coping*

Although the current study is focused on family resilience, it is important to consider personal coping because the way mothers are coping influences their own reactions to deployment, and their own reactions will likely influence their children's responses (Gelfand & Teti, 1990; Riggs, 1990). Keeping busy, engaging in healthy behaviors, seeking support, and emotion coaching were the strategies women tended to report as helpful to getting through deployment. These strategies were used to distract them from the stress and worry of deployment, help them attain resources, recruit assistance, and positively reframe their situations. These are all positive qualities associated with decreasing their personal demands (e.g., negative affect, increased responsibilities) and enabling benefits (e.g., self-enhancement, positive affect).

However, women noted how attempts to cope could also increase their perceptions of demands. For example, keeping themselves busy and engaging in a lot of healthy behaviors could encourage avoidance of emotions that would eventually pile-up and become unavoidable. As Erika said,

Actually sitting here talking about it is making me think, and I think it would be better for me to just let myself have the free time, and I just do so much 'cause I work the two jobs but in between the two jobs I work out and I tutor kids. And tutoring takes up, you know an hour or two hours a day of, you know time I could be sitting at home and being upset and processing the fact that my husband's gone. And I'm not. Instead I just keep myself going 'cause then when I do have a

second to think about it, it's not good... I think the next time I'm gonna have a chance to sit down and think about it is gonna be Christmas. Which sucks... Then it comes on like a freaking Mack truck (#02; 859-864, 869-870, 872).

Constantly staying busy also sometimes contributed to women's feelings regarding the lack of time they had to spend with their children and enhance their mother-child relationships. As Jolene reflected,

I've been having a really personal struggle with that because I know what I want our relationship to be and I know the mom I want to be to her, it's just not physically possible, I'm only one person, and I'm not capable of letting any aspect of my life go... I just can't give anything up, and unfortunately letting go of my relationship with my daughter, letting go of the things that I want with my daughter is the easiest thing to let go of, and I know I need to stop. I tell myself that everyday, but yet I don't. So that's personally kind of something that I'm dealing with. And when my husband's home it's a lot easier because I don't feel as bad. If I have to write a paper, there's someone else to play with her (#19; 391-393; 394-399).

In sum, personal coping, while helpful, does not come without downfalls or challenges. Women constantly interpreted the value of their actions, noting how what they were doing was influencing their own and their family's overall positive and negative experience of deployment. Again, the meaning attributed to the coping behaviors influences the overall process of resilience, as seen in Figure 1.

### *Relational and Family Coping*

Relational or family coping has been discussed in previous family stress literature, especially in terms of family resources in the FAAR Model. First, cohesion involves maintaining closeness even as the family identity changes during stressful events. Second, flexibility or adaptability involves sustaining daily routines and rituals, adjusting to new demands while retaining a sense of the family identity from past to future. Third, family communication, verbal and nonverbal, helps facilitate shared expectations about family cohesion and flexibility. Affective communication (e.g., showing love and support) and instrumental communication (e.g., explaining roles, rules, decisions) are both considered communication skills that aid in resilience (Patterson, 2002). Yet how families attain and maintain these resources or exhibit these skills and qualities, as a way of coping together, is less clear in the previous literature. Good communication, adaptability, and cohesion are indeed valuable resources. However, without knowing the process of achieving these ideals and developing these skills together we still cannot fully understand the family experience of coping with stress.

The current study clarifies many of the actions and behaviors women take, with their partners and children, to maintain family resources such as cohesion, flexibility, or positive communication. First, in terms of relational coping, the women reported continuing to participate in joint activities and show affection and positivity, even from a distance, to maintain closeness with their deployed partners. These actions helped them feel they were keeping the positive qualities of their relationships alive and well. They

also ended conversations on a high note, and discussed end-of-life issues, to deal with the realities of mortality that came with the specific context of deployment.

Making decisions about communication between partners was also important to relational coping, and women's attempts to maintain cohesion and a good communication balance. Based on choices to communicate openly or withhold communication about feelings, events, and expectations, women felt they were able to maintain involvement with their partners and/or protect themselves and their partners. Based on these needs for involvement and protection, and how they relate to decisions about open versus restricted communication, partners can be placed into four patterns: reluctants, sharers, protectors, and separates (See Table 1).

Partners high in involvement and high in protection can be considered *reluctant* communicators. Although they want to protect each other from burden, hurt, or worry, they also want to maintain a connection during deployment. These women often discussed wondering if they had made the right choice about communicating their needs, concerns, and feelings to their husbands during deployment. They also talked about some topics they really did not need to hear from their husbands, but had heard anyway. Balancing what to talk about and what to withhold based on high needs for involvement and protection was often difficult, but it also allowed women to fulfill both needs to some extent.

Next, partners high in involvement and low in protection are *sharers*. Their main priority was maintaining connection, so they worried less about protecting or shielding each other from necessary information. Often women reported that communication was

vital to the survival of their relationships; it was all they had, so they needed to maintain it. Additional functions of this sharing included reuniting more smoothly, maintaining a connection, and providing an outlet for their husbands.

The partners low in involvement and high in protection can be considered *protectors*. It is not that these women did not want to maintain closeness, or that these women never spoke to their husbands, but they made careful considerations about what they decided to share or what they wanted their husbands to share with them. Sometimes withholding open communication was based on an inability to talk openly (e.g., OPSEC) or a bad connection through the telephone. But often they were hoping to protect their husbands, allowing them to stay focused on the mission rather than thinking about what they were missing at home. They were also protecting themselves from information that might add to their levels of fear and worry during deployment. Again, many still spoke when given the opportunity, but they did not openly communicate about feelings and events that might cause worry or burden.

Finally, partners low in involvement and low in protection can be called *separates*. These partners did not necessarily want to protect each other from worry or hurt; yet they did not typically communicate openly. This lack of communication again sometimes stemmed from an inability to talk, based on OPSEC and/or limited phone or Internet access. It also sometimes occurred when women began to feel distanced from the relationship, dissatisfied with the communication during deployment, or simply lacked the time to maintain high levels of involvement. This type of communication was less

common, as only a couple women reported limiting their communication to this extent and without protective needs and intentions.

These relational coping strategies, especially the choices made about communication, have major implications for personal and relational resilience. There are difficult realities during deployment, including stressors (e.g., absence, potential mortality) and personal and relational strains (e.g., negative affect, relational loss, relational hardship). Coping with these challenges through activities, affection, and communication choices could mean getting to positive personal and relational outcomes or experiences (e.g., positive affect and relational growth). For example, many women felt open communication helped enhance relationship quality and closeness and helped partners develop relationship skills. However, others felt that withholding communication was important to protecting their own and their partners' well-being, which would ultimately have implications for the survival of the relationships. Without further investigation it is impossible to know which coping communication type is best for individuals and their relationships. It may be that different couples require different approaches, or it may be that some approaches are more effective than others.

A study assessing couple discussion patterns in couples where the women had been diagnosed with breast cancer revealed that selective open communication was perceived more satisfying than other patterns (Hilton & Koop, 1994). This may also be the case for military families during deployment, making *reluctant* or *protecting* patterns more satisfactory than the closed patterns of *separates* or the more fully open patterns of *sharers*. A review of the limited literature on the unique stressors of military families

concludes that ignoring relationship concerns as a way to avoid conflict can complicate relationships during reunification (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003). As such, the authors recommend for practitioners (family life educators, specifically) to endorse direct, honest communication within families to promote family cohesion during separation. From this perspective, *sharers* would be more likely to exhibit family cohesion, which can be a coping resource (Patterson, 2002). The struggle in making choices about communication is clear in the current data, as are the different coping communication patterns. Further analysis, ideally with longitudinal data, is now necessary to make claims about the utility and effectiveness of different approaches in terms of outcomes such as relational and communication satisfaction, cohesion, conflict, worry, and uncertainty during deployment.

Second, in terms of family coping, mothers reported working very closely with their children to ensure father-child relationship maintenance and child and family adjustment to deployment. The disturbance of routines and rituals can be disruptive and threaten the stability of the family (Steinglass, Reiss, & Howe, 1993), so adjusting to new demands while also maintaining the family identity, routines, and rituals is important when faced with family stress (Patterson, 2002). Yet with a deployed spouse/parent, the father is missing from the family processes. This absence necessitates a change to routines and rituals, creating a potential void in the family system with which mothers coped.

Women in this study reported several coping strategies that helped maintain family functioning, adjustment, and relationship presence in the home and across the

distance. These approaches were in response to the ways children reacted to the deployment and changes in the family (i.e., defensive approaches). They were also attempts to avoid negative reactions and effects in the family (i.e., offensive approaches). In line with the previous research, women adjusted to new responsibilities and maintained routines to cope with the task and role changes they experienced in the family at home (e.g., increased responsibility, parenting challenges). They promoted teamwork and engaged their kids in new tasks, for example, to help ease the burden placed on them during deployment. They also reacted to relationship changes at home (e.g., decreased time, lower relationship quality) by engaging and maintaining an attachment with their children. For example, they created special mother-child time and showed affection to their kids. While maintaining their own mother-child relationships at home, mothers also acted as gatekeepers to the father-child relationship. They were often the providers of information and the link between fathers and children during this absence.

Creating father-child involvement, including facilitating interaction and paternal presence, helped maintain family relationships and bring the absent partner/father back into the family routines and rituals considered so important to the family identity. The absent fathers continued to be a part of the families' lives, activities, and conversations through communication between mothers and children at home and between the children and fathers via webcam, Internet, mail, and telephone. Mothers spoke about their husbands often, giving children information and reassuring them of dad's return. They also continued to refer to objects as daddy's and reference dad's disciplining strategies or behavioral preferences, so he was always linguistically present within the home.

These strategies do seem likely to help maintain the father-child relationship and make fathers more present within the family, and mothers seem to believe this is for the good of their children and their husbands. However, the effects of these well-intended strategies on the children (and fathers) are not clear in the current data. Perhaps information, paternal presence, and interaction do make children feel better about their fathers' absence and more secure in their relationships with their fathers. On the other hand, knowing too much about the absence may also produce more fear and worry for children. In a discussion about sharing information with children about parents' injuries incurred during deployment, Cozza and colleagues (2005) report that the information parents share with children may not be developmentally appropriate for the children and likely stems more from parent's anxieties than children's needs. This may also be the case regarding deployment information in general. Also, interacting with their fathers may be disruptive to children's daily routines, which are typically maintained as a way of coping with deployment. Taryn said,

He Skypes with the kids maybe once a month or so. They don't really care to do that. Usually it's more of a chore for me than anything else, and then I'm trying to kind of hide that. Ya know, I'm like pretend like you want to talk to him, ya know, like I don't know, I mean they love him so much, but I think it's just more of an inconvenience for them because they have to stop what they're doing and sit down and talk to him on the computer (#09; 196-200).

It may be necessary for kids to interact with their fathers more routinely, which is often difficult when time is limited, for it to be a valuable family coping strategy.

Understanding how the family coping strategies women reported influence all members of the family is a necessary avenue for future research. Family coping involves time and energy for mothers, which is often lacking, so knowing whether or not it is positively impacting children and partners would be beneficial. In the current study however, although it is sometimes difficult, mothers felt that maintaining these connections and paternal presence and reassuring their children was necessary and helpful in coping with deployment.

Technology has enabled men and women to talk to their spouses during deployment, yet stories from the women in this study illustrate the struggle that ensues with the ability to interact more frequently online and over the telephone. For some women technology helped ease the deployment pain, as they were able to share activities and conversations with their husbands that they felt developed their relationships across the distance. Other women's access to communication was more limited, based on their husbands' ranks, locations, or quality of connection. One might assume that the former is more effective when considering family resilience. However, as noted, the ability to communicate sometimes created questions for partners about what and how much to communicate. Furthermore, not hearing from their partners (after having had access to interactions) when they went out on missions or were busy with work was an impetus for higher uncertainty and fear. Finally, mothers reported mixed reactions from their children when they interacted with their fathers over the Internet. Some children loved the interaction and tried to hug the machine; yet others became disinterested, bothered, or upset.

In a recent New York Times article, Seligman (2009), a writer and military wife, wrote,

I know I'm not the first military spouse who has struggled to communicate with a loved one on deployment — and I know I won't be the last. For those who came before me, the burden to overcome was communicating without technology — waiting months for letters to arrive. For me and those still to come, it's learning to communicate despite technology.

Each of these examples implies a need for a balance in learning how to best communicate, and perhaps there are both points of too much and too little communication. With deployment comes absence, and it is possible that too much communication availability could restrict women's potential for growth and self-enhancement during deployment. It could also increase potential burdens on women, as they are faced with communication struggles with their husbands as well as the responsibility of enabling father-child interactions. The lack of control over when and how much they communicate also complicates the way we look at what levels of communication availability enable family resilience. Many noted the difficulty not being able to reach their husbands caused. They also said their children constantly asked to talk to daddy, even when they it was not possible. So when actual interactions occurred, they were on the deployed spouse's (or military's) time. Instant messaging and emailing were exceptions to this inability to contact husbands, when available, but most still noted that being unable to reach their husbands by telephone made their relationships and deployment more difficult. Consequently, many women made themselves available at all

hours of the night and day, despite sleep, class, or other obligations, for interactions via telephone and online because they did not want to miss their opportunity. If the communication went both ways, it might be easier for women to control the talk time and maintain a routine with their children.

On the other hand, too limited availability may disrupt family relationships and make reintegration more difficult. Partners may feel less able to cope together and as a family through involvement, affection, positivity, confronting mortality, and father-child involvement, at least with the efficiency that technology allows. This limited ability to cope together could diminish feelings of relational growth and create distance in family relationships. As such, it is necessary to further investigate different deployment communication patterns and accessibility to know what is most satisfying for families. With this information researchers could inform the military, and family advocacy groups, about how to best serve military personnel and family members with technological advancements.

Considering the current data, practitioners might begin by normalizing the communication struggle that may be present in relationships so women do not feel guilty when they feel overwhelmed by conversations or do not have time to answer the phone. They might also encourage women to make the struggle explicit with their husbands so they can learn each other's communication preferences and reach their most effective coping communication pattern. Many wives discussed what they did and did not want to hear and/or share with their husbands, which provided an opportunity for understanding and perhaps more satisfying conversations.

### *Coping and Implications for Ambiguous Loss Theory*

Many of the coping strategies discussed are relevant to ambiguous loss, and the relational and family coping strategies also illustrate how communication is an essential component to understanding ambiguous loss theory. Huebner and colleagues (2005; 2007) conclude that developing skills, discussing role changes, making new roles explicit, mastering new roles, and planning for future changes may help families readjust to ambiguous loss and are likely to occur during deployment. Boss (2006) also developed a resilience-centered framework, promoting finding meaning, alleviating the need for mastery, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, revising attachments, and discovering hope. The current results corroborate many of these conclusions and help explicate *how* individuals and families meet these resilience goals through their communication and behavior. More specifically, the women discussed learning and taking control of new roles and responsibilities at home and involving their children in new tasks. They also used personal emotion coaching to maintain flexibility and a positive outlook, and they revised attachments with their children and husbands (through time together, affection, and communication choices). Based on descriptions of newfound independence and growth, it also appears wives were able to reconstruct their own identities as military wives. Participating in new activities socially and personally helped the women in this process of gaining independence and personal growth. Given the uncontrollable nature of deployment, however, families did not seem to be able to aptly prepare for the future or discuss changes; yet they often accepted this uncontrollability as part of their military lives. In addition to these strategies consistent with previous

literature, numerous other approaches relevant to coping with ambiguous loss are also evidenced in the current data.

First, creating paternal presence and involvement between fathers and children during deployment is particularly interesting in terms of ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss is defined by a presence-absence paradox and boundary ambiguity (Boss, 1999). In the context of deployment, and in these cases, husbands/fathers are physically absent from the family. However, as a way to deal with this physical absence, mothers report their attempts to maintain psychological paternal presence. Communicating with and about the absent family member helps bring him back into the family relationships and routines because he is still able to interact with the family and even provide input. Although the strength of the absent father's role may be weakened during deployment, creating paternal presence and maintaining the positive aspects of the family relationships likely has an impact on the way fathers reintegrate into the family. When the husband/father returns home, having been involved in the family during separation may help him ease into this physical presence more easily. Furthermore, it might help him avoid psychological absence upon return.

Second, communication choices between wives and their husbands are also relevant to ambiguous loss theory. The communication challenges partners experienced parallel the presence-absence paradox. Because their husbands are still a part of their lives emotionally and psychologically, even when they are absent physically, women expressed a struggle with knowing how to balance this presence and absence in their communication. In some cases, women (along with their partners) wanted to nurture their

connection, while in other cases maintaining more separation was important to the well being of either or both partners. Using the previously established labels, *sharers* are likely experiencing the most presence in their relationships, whereas *separates* and *protectors* are experiencing the most separation or absence. *Reluctants* are likely struggling the most with the absence-presence because they are trying to foster presence while also being cognizant of the need to separate.

The current study underscores how the absence-presence paradox and boundary ambiguity are manifested in the ways women are communicating in their families and facilitating communication between their family members. Communication is central to coping with ambiguous loss, as people are constantly negotiating their boundaries and the absence-presence paradox. To extend this line of research, future research could help further explicate the different family/partner communication patterns (especially paternal presence and involvement-protection types) and how they relate to feelings surrounding ambiguous loss. For example, women felt that maintaining a close connection between the husband and the home through conversations and information made reintegration smoother. Future research could follow families through reintegration to investigate this connection. Survey research could also test correlations between different patterns of communication and feelings of loss, presence, emotions, reintegration ease or conflict, relational satisfaction, and other issues pertinent to ambiguous loss and deployment.

Finally, the ambiguity of the situation, in terms of whether or not (and how) their husbands would return home, prompted end-of-life conversations between partners that many felt were premature based on their relatively young ages. Prior to and during

deployment, partners needed to discuss morbidity issues, such as wills, funerals, and burials. These conversations were meant to reduce uncertainty about tasks they would need to fulfill if faced with the death of their husbands, but it also created strong emotions (e.g., sadness, fear) and uncertainty about their situations. So although the hope of return is alive and well, conversations are necessary that bring the alternative possibility to the forefront. While deemed necessary, and often required by the military, these conversations contribute to even more ambiguity regarding the deployment.

Overall, these women seem to have found a variety of ways to cope with the stresses of deployment. Of course, and as alluded to in this discussion of coping, seeking different types of support from others (including husbands, families, and friends) was another important strategy for getting through the trials of deployment. In many cases, the women received support, which is considered a coping resource. However, in the midst of a stressful event, they also elicited responses they considered unsupportive. In stressful situations, others are forced to respond not only to the person experiencing stress, but also to the context. And it appears that knowing the right thing to say is often difficult. Danielle tried to explain this phenomenon,

I worked in hospice and funeral service for so long. And I lost my five year old son was killed in an accident, so I knew that from personal and professional experience, that people are gonna say in situations what they think works. And like if you lose a child, ‘Oh well at least you have another one’...What do you say? I’m a grief counselor, I really can’t tell you anything supportive to say, except I’m here if you need me (#26; 709-712, 728-730).

Although the context of her example is different, Danielle used it as an analogy to say that people often do not know what to say to her about deployment and other stressful life events. Consequently, many responses from others are less than supportive. There are, however, many things people say and do that the women found helpful during deployment.

### *Supportive and Unsupportive Responses*

#### *Response Evaluation*

The line between supportive and unsupportive responses is blurred. There are many things people can say that some recipients will like and others will not, and sometimes it depends on who is the provider of the support. For these women, there were three prominent examples of the variability in evaluations of responses from others. A common force behind many evaluations of whether or not responses were supportive was the level of understanding of the support providers. People who understood the experience of deployment were deemed most supportive in their responses regarding deployment. Yet there may be limits to this conclusion, as formalized military resources did not have the same supportive impact on the women.

First, women found information and advice supportive when it came from husbands and/or other military wives. They also found relating experiences and showing understanding most effective from other military wives. Peers and husbands knew the experience the women were going through and were able to relate their own experiences or provide information that was helpful during deployment. Women could also learn from their peers and how they handled adverse situations, which gave them not only

information but also a feeling of normalcy. However, when other non-understanding others offered comparable situations or tried to offer advice, it was not received favorably. Women found advice, comparing circumstances, and a lack of awareness of their situations as particularly unsupportive during deployment. They said that although many of these types of comments did not intend harm, they were annoying, unhelpful, and even hurtful, as they showed a lack of respect, understanding, and appreciation for the sacrifices they were making.

Second, and perhaps counter-intuitive to this point, which highlights the value of appreciation and recognition, “thank you” was another message women received in different ways. Many women greatly appreciated the sentiment, but others felt it was awkward and artificial. For those who did not like when people said thank you, they said they were not sure how to respond. Making it even more complicated, some women appreciated expressions of thanks directed toward their husbands, verbally or through sending packages and letters, but they did not want thanks directed toward them. Others were truly touched when people directed their thanks toward them, and their family, for their sacrifices during deployment.

A third prominent example of varied reactions to others’ responses during deployment involved more formal lines of support—military resources and support groups. Most women, especially those who lived on post, were able to list a multitude of military resources available to military families. However, the evaluation and use of these resources varied greatly. Some women were greatly involved in different community activities and resources (e.g., kids groups, volunteer groups, FRGs). Others were not

highly involved. A lack of involvement was sometimes based on the timing or location of the events and resources. But many women also felt the services were lacking, and even harmful. The FRG is the most salient example. According to ArmyFRG.org, FRGs are intended for military spouses to gain “all of the pertinent information and resources [they] need to stay informed and connected.” FRGs stemmed from the Family Support Groups (FSGs) started in the 1970s and 1980s, which began in response to the realization that family issues and military readiness and retention were related (Rosen et al., 2000). FRG services may be well intended, but they are received with mixed feelings. Many women felt these services only provided a space for complaining and gossip. FRG leaders are other wives who are also currently experiencing deployment, and attendees are other military wives within the same deployed unit. Many women felt the leaders were also busy and experiencing stress, so the groups were not effective. Some did not receive the information and connection they were promised, and others felt that too many distressed women in the same room became unhelpful rather than helpful. So while an ability to directly relate to the experience is helpful in more informal support, it can be problematic within larger, formalized support groups.

Other formal sources of support, such as therapists or rear detachment officers (i.e., leaders in the unit left behind during deployment), were also sometimes viewed with skepticism. One woman reported that her on-post therapist seemed biased toward divorce. To explain, she repeated a quote she thought was appropriate to the problem: “If the Army wanted you to have a family, they would issue you one.” Following this premise, she thought military therapists might not have the best interest of the family in

mind. Military resources may be intended to help families, but if the overall intention is military readiness and retention (as it was in the 1970s and 80s), rather than family health and well being, it is problematic for spouses at home in need of genuine family-targeted support.

Women's responses to messages and support show why it is difficult for people and/or agencies to know what to do or say with individuals who are experiencing stressful events. Ambiguous loss situations may make this even more difficult, as providers are also likely affected by the uncertainty of the event circumstances. Previous research highlights different functions of support, including allowing recipients to vent (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984) and communicate feelings and emotions (Patterson, 2002), offering reassurance, aiding in communication skills, reducing uncertainty, providing companionship, assisting in recovery (Albrecht & Adelman, 1984), managing uncertainty (Brashers et al., 2004), and helping recipients make decisions, develop rules, and adjust to new roles (Patterson, 2002). Yet, offering support can diminish one's feelings of control (Brashers et al., 2004), and threaten one's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; MacGeorge et al., 2002). As illustrated in the current study, offers of support (e.g., thank you, questions) can also create discomfort when recipients do not know how to reciprocate a response. So while researchers continue to study different types, sources, and functions of support, evaluations of this support and attributions about why different responses are supportive or unsupportive in different contexts may be more fruitful. If we know more about how people will respond to support, and why, we are more likely able to help others provide it.

Goldsmith and colleagues (2000), in a review of recipients' evaluations of enacted support, report that most research discusses evaluations of support as either good or bad (i.e., helpful-unhelpful, satisfied-unsatisfied). They add, however, that studies have shown support can be helpful but not sensitive, or sensitive but not effective or appropriate. Although there may be differences between the adjectives helpful, sensitive, and supportive when investigating evaluations of hypothetical troubles talk scenarios (Goldsmith, McDermott, & Alexander, 2000), the current participants did not distinguish between different descriptors of supportive responses. Helpful and supportive were used interchangeably, and both elicited responses about emotional support, informational/instrumental support, and reassuring/encouraging, which Goldsmith and colleagues (2000) tied to sensitive, helpful, and supportive, respectively. When considering their own perceptions of responses from others during deployment, the women were focused more on how the responses made them feel than on descriptions of the messages themselves. In some cases, they did say responses were annoying, insensitive, kind, or encouraging, but more often they reflected on their own feelings in reaction to the messages or behaviors. For example, supportive responses helped relieve women's sense of burden (e.g., childcare help, support by proxy) and made them feel strong, cared for, and included (e.g., interaction, emotional support, activities and invitations). They also made them feel recognized and valued.

In the current results we can see that awareness and appreciation were among the most effective ways to offer support because they made women feel their sacrifices were appreciated and not made in vain. However, faking understanding, comparing to

unrelated experiences, or making assumptions about women's views and circumstances were among the most unhelpful because they took away from the pride and significance women felt about the duties their families were serving. The common denominator is about feeling understood and valued. This ties to confirmation theory, which posits that individuals possess a fundamental need to be validated as unique, valuable, and worthy of respect (Cissna & Sieburg, 1981). Further, confirming messages validate individuals' self-definitions (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) and, similar to person-centered comforting messages (Burlison & Goldsmith, 1998), provide an opportunity for people to process their thoughts and feelings (Dailey, 2006). During deployment, women are giving up a lot and taking on a lot at home, so they want their sacrifices and efforts to be recognized and appreciated. The confirming messages they receive from others may encourage their meaning making process as well as their personal development (Buber, 1965) and identity construction (Watzlawick et. al., 1967). These messages may also be related to openness. Dailey (2006) found that higher perceived parental confirmation was related to higher adolescent openness in families. So perhaps perceptions of confirming messages from family, friends, and community members would encourage openness for women during deployment. Indeed, many women reported a choice not disclose their circumstances or feelings to others because they were afraid of the reactions they might receive from others. Put another way, they were cautious of disconfirming messages because they did not want to feel their sacrifices were made in vain. This connection between confirming messages and women's willingness to communicate openly with others should be addressed in future research.

Support in general is often discussed in terms of its effects on the recipients, e.g., reducing negative affect, promoting positive affect, and/or encouraging healthy behaviors (Segrin & Flora, 2005), so it makes sense to evaluate specific behaviors and messages based on the feelings and behaviors they evoke in recipients. Allowing participants to report and evaluate responses from others in their own life situations helps uncover individual and contextual reactions to communication and behavior that are not accessible in hypothetical scenarios. When the women thought about and reported what people did that was “good” and “bad,” their reactions were tangible. They were brought to tears thinking about the joy they experienced when people expressed gratitude, and they remarked with sarcasm and disdain about people who asked inappropriate questions, made insensitive comparisons, or expressed pity. As a whole, women found the majority of people to be generally supportive. Yet the salience of the unsupportive reactions was illustrated by the detail with which women remembered the context of the interactions and the power of their reactions. For example, several women reported that certain questions and comments made them want to punch the message provider, even though they were non-violent individuals. Supportive messages may be more common, but it is important to continue studying unsupportive messages because although limited in quantity they may be equal in impact. This corroborates previous research stating that negative social interactions may be less frequent than positive interactions, but they arouse considerable distress (Rook, 1998), frustration, and disappointment (Rook, 2003).

### *Support and Transactional Resilience*

Understanding these emotional reactions to both supportive and unsupportive responses is important to the overall process of resilience because a constant reinterpretation of demands and capabilities occurs as people interact with others. Support is one part of a bigger process, and its impact is meaningful. When women felt underappreciated and misunderstood, they began to question their sacrifices, wondering for what and for whom they were doing this. These doubts can create additional uncertainty and call into question their own meaning making processes (e.g., feelings of duty and obligation), adding more to their already lengthy compilation of demands or challenges. On the other hand, supportive responses (e.g., emotional support, appreciation, instrumental support) made women feel cared for, included, understood, and normal. They also helped take the burden off the women, assisting them with various responsibilities. Mitigating negative affect (e.g., loneliness, sadness) and helping women gain control within their new roles can then reduce demands and improve the capability to deal with challenges, making support part of the cyclical and transactional process of resilience. These evaluations or reactions from women are denoted with a +/- in the Transactional Model of Resilience (see Figure 1).

Social support is one aspect of the resilience process that illustrates how coping is not a psychological process, but rather a transactional process between people (Afifi et al., 2006). Stressful events take place within a social context and are managed as individuals and in groups (Lyons et al., 1998), so it is imperative to understand the many processes that occur within these groups. Support is certainly one of these interactive

processes, but the current study also highlights various other forms of communicative coping that occur between relationship partners as well as within families, as previously discussed. According to Afifi et al. (2006), most research on communal coping, or the ongoing and fluid exchange of ideas between people who feel joint ownership for the stressful event, is focused on how one party helps the other cope. Very few analyses of coping explore the profound depth of responses people have to stressful events and assess conjoining interactive processes of altering stress (Lyons et al., 1998). The current study fills these gaps in the literature with its focus on the in-depth experience of deployment and relational and family coping, communication, and support.

#### Limitations

Overall, this study was successful in terms of understanding military wives' perceptions of their experiences with deployment and developing a communication-centered model of resilience. However, there are some limitations that should be noted.

First, the sample is limited based upon gender and sexuality. This limitation reflects the demographics of the military. Although the number of women in the military has increased over the past few decades, the military remains as a heterosexual- and male-dominated enterprise. In 2007 only 14% of the armed forces members were women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Approximately half of military women are married (Segal & Segal, 2004), but I did not reach any men experiencing spousal deployment in all my recruitment attempts. In fact, no participants were able to think of men who were experiencing spousal deployment. This could be because close to one-half of married enlisted women and one-third of married female officers, as of 2002, were married to

servicemen (Segal & Segal, 2004). Taken together, these numbers leave much fewer husbands on the home front during deployment. Also, statistics show that gay men and lesbians comprise only 2.5% of the members of the armed forces (Gates, 2004). Further, approximately 6,300 military personnel were discharged for homosexuality between 1998 and 2003 (Segal & Segal, 2004). However, exact numbers cannot be known based on the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy set forth by the military. This leaves not only fewer numbers of gay and lesbian partners home during deployment; it also disenfranchises them, as their partnerships may not be recognized by the military. Being disenfranchised then might affect individuals’ willingness to participate in interviews as well as utilize supportive resources offered, especially by the military. Future research should seek to reach heterosexual and homosexual men and lesbian women in order to further understand the needs of this underrepresented segment of the population.

Second, the current participants report some time points during the deployment phase being more difficult than others (e.g., middle, beginning, end). In many cases the women attached different feelings and experiences to these various stages, which implies there are stages within each phase of deployment (e.g., pre-deployment, deployment, and reunification; Rabb et al., 1993). The current study offers the perspective of women in the various time points of the deployment, so it provides an overall picture of the experience of deployment. However, it does not make comparisons across different time points. Nor does it follow the participants throughout their entire deployment phase experience, including each potential stage. In future research with a greater number of participants in different time points of deployment, and with longitudinal data, further conclusions can

be made about coping and support during different deployment period stages and experiences.

Third, the current study also does not make comparisons between jobs and locations, both for husbands and wives. Participants' husbands were in various locations, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Korea, and the Caribbean. They also worked in various branches of the military and with differing job titles and tasks. The current study does not address differences that may occur across branches, jobs, or locations (e.g., combat vs. non-combat). The severity of symptoms for children and adults during deployment has been correlated with the military family member being located in a combat zone (Kelley, 1994). Although all women in this study reported numerous demands, and all had coping strategies to help them get through the deployments, some may be unique to the context of the deployment. For example, some uncertainties were different for women whose husbands were in non-combat zones and more able to explore the country and live freely. One woman worried more about her husband's health and eating than she did about his job requirements. Another worried about her husband getting into trouble going out with the guys. Differences related to where and for what partners are deployed could affect coping and resilience and should be addressed in future research.

Also, the current study does not distinguish between women who live on post, away from post, or back home during deployment. It is common for women to return home to family and friends during deployment. Most of the current participants did not return home; some lived on post, many lived very close to post, and others were in surrounding areas of post. Some women noted that although many women go home to

family during deployment, they do not think it is a good idea. Others tried to go home as much as possible, if not permanently, to be with their families. For those who live close to post, or on post, resources may be more readily available. Also, they may be more likely to receive understanding responses from others, who are more accustomed to the military experience. Indeed, some women noted that even the state they lived in could affect whether or not people were supportive of their sacrifices. It is a choice for women to live near post or away from post, and greater depth of understanding about the different experiences, benefits, and challenges these choices may produce would be valuable for helping women make the best decisions. From the current participants' responses, it appears that there will be challenges and benefits to any choice, but the specifics of this claim are not yet clear.

Finally, and also related to women's locations, telephone interviews were conducted in order to reach women across different posts and in different branches of the military. There are concerns that telephone interviews may be impersonal and may not elicit the same candor as face-to-face interviews; however, participants may actually reveal more over the phone because they know they will never meet the researcher (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Sunderland (1999) argues that telephones are a valuable context for which "people produce, maintain, and reproduce social relations" (p. 115), and they should be considered a valuable tool for research. In the current interviews, whether or not they were conducted face-to-face or over the telephone did not seem to determine quality and depth of the conversation. Conducting telephone interviews also did not seem to affect the length of the interview, as face-to-face interviews averaged 96

minutes and phone interviews averaged 90 minutes. So although face-to-face interviewing was the preferred method, to more thoroughly access nonverbal cues and maintain a personalized connection with participants, using the telephone was an excellent alternative and should be considered a viable tool for qualitative research seeking to reach a broader sample.

### Future Directions

The current study is not without limitations. However, collecting the perspectives of these 26 women in the midst of deployment was a valuable step in the direction of understanding the transactional nature of resilience and the actions women take, along with their families and communities, to navigate life in the midst of a stressful event. These stories, and the analyses of these stories, can now act as a foundation for future research in this domain. Adding to the suggestions for future research proposed above, I will briefly discuss future directions fruitful to the development of theory and practice.

In future research, especially with intentions to expand our understanding of the transactional nature of resilience, it is necessary to access all family members' perceptions of the deployment experience, coping, and support. The current study addresses women's perceptions of the individual, relational, and family deployment experience and coping. However, it does not take into account partners' or children's perceptions. As discussed, wives'/mothers' ideas of what is helpful for their relationships and families may be based upon their own needs rather than what is most helpful for their family members. Because wives/mothers do seem to be the leaders of the family resilience process during deployment, it would be productive for practitioners to be able

to guide them through the process in ways most valuable to the family as a whole. As such, future research should not only assess the experience of children and partners within their own resilience processes; it should also assess all family members' perceptions of how other's responses, actions, and supportive attempts are valuable or detrimental to their own coping and resilience.

Also, getting at the supportive dimensions of the transactional resilience model, gaining the perspective of supportive and unsupportive message providers would also be a fruitful avenue for research. Assessing the intentions behind different responses during deployment (i.e., supportive and unsupportive messages) and the enactment of these messages would help identify messages that are intended to be supportive but received as unsupportive. For example, pity responses such as "I'm sorry" or "That must be so hard for you" may be provided with intentions of compassion and sympathy. However, most women disliked these responses and found them offensive and counter to their own feelings of pride. Knowing more about which messages are likely misinterpreted, and why, will help inform researchers as well as message providers with supportive intentions. In turn, improving supportive efficacy should help alleviate demands and aid in the process of resilience.

A third avenue for future research involves employing new methods of research. The current study provides rich descriptions of women's various deployment experiences, coping behaviors, and evaluations of support, and it proposes a Transactional Model of Resilience based on analyses of these descriptions. Using these descriptions and conclusions, it is necessary to employ new methods to test various

aspects of the claims. For example, using survey methods, we can investigate the prevalence and usefulness of different coping communication patterns (e.g., separates, protectors, reluctants, sharers) and other coping strategies in terms of their relationship to other variables (e.g., relationship satisfaction, uncertainty, role ambiguity). We can also investigate the relationship between various deployment experiences (e.g., relational growth, discipline challenges, positive/negative affect) and evaluations of different forms of support. Understanding these relationships will help further develop theories of family resilience, especially in terms of the relationship between processes and outcomes. It will also provide practitioners with useful information for guiding their clients through the resilience process. Practitioners have the opportunity to normalize the deployment experience while also suggesting various behaviors that will help in the resilience process. As an example, practitioners can normalize the communication struggle that might be a source of worry or frustration for partners at home during deployment. Then, knowing how different patterns are related to various outcomes or variables (e.g., if *sharing* tends to be related to higher relationship satisfaction, but also higher uncertainty or anxiety) might assist practitioners in making helpful suggestions depending on the needs and states of the client.

Also related to method choices, future studies should conduct research with military spouses over time. The current study accesses women's perceptions of the deployment experiences, coping, and support at one point in time. And although the women were able to recall experiences, feelings, behaviors, and responses from throughout the deployment, it would be beneficial to study the course of resilience over

time. As previously mentioned, women noted how they went through stages during deployment. For some the beginning was the easiest, it got hard in the middle, and easy again at the end. For others the beginning and end were the hardest, and it got easier in the middle. Many women looked forward to their husbands coming home for “rest and relaxation” or the actual homecoming, but others thought reuniting was the hardest part of deployment. Changes in perceptions of their experiences over time likely influences women’s coping behaviors and needs. Women may also learn from their actions and change their coping behaviors over time. So following spouses through the whole process of deployment would add richness to our knowledge of the experience of deployment, especially as it relates to ambiguous loss theory, and the resilience process as it occurs over time.

While the discussion of the results and future directions is tied specifically to the context of deployment, future research should apply these claims and evaluate the proposed model in other contexts and events. The conclusions may be particularly relevant to other ambiguous loss contexts, such as divorce, chronic illness (e.g., Alzheimer’s disease, HIV/AIDS, cancer), imprisonment, and adoption. With continued research, we can see if the coping strategies and supportive responses discussed are valuable to people in various circumstances, which elicit varied reactions and experiences. For example, paternal presence (or parental presence, more generally) may be particularly relevant to adoption or divorce and single parent situations. Different communication patterns may be helpful in choosing how to communicate with people who are chronically ill, or how they might choose to communicate with others. Managing

change and maintaining positive relationship qualities are strategies potentially relevant to prison relationships or other long-distance relationships. Coping as well as supportive responses from others should be based upon the stressful event and the experience of the event, so continuing to study these issues in various domains will improve our proficiency in helping others and ourselves work through the resilience process together.

### Conclusion

To conclude, the current study was successful in developing a better understanding of the deployment experience for women as individuals and as members of their family systems. Deployment is a disruptive, stressful event for military spouses, laden with control challenges, identity struggles, and negative affect. Moreover, women's challenges extended beyond the self into women's relationships and families. Women felt the intensity of relational loss and hardship with their husbands absent for months at a time. The experience also affected mothers' relationships with their children, as both were emotionally and behaviorally affected by the deployment. Many mothers felt their relationship quality diminished, and with their compounding responsibilities at home they sometimes struggled with their roles as nurturers and disciplinarians of their children. However, even in the midst of all the challenges and struggles, deployment also provided an opportunity for personal and relational growth.

Women often felt empowered by their newfound control and used their time to develop their sense of self with new personal and social activities. They also learned not to take their relationships for granted and worked hard to build trust and continue to grow as a couple. As such, stress theories need to incorporate the positive aspects of stressful

events, considering both adversarial growth (opportunities arising from the event) and positive reinterpretations of the event. In many cases, the women felt the deployment itself created new opportunities for personal and relational growth. However, these women's emotional fortitude and behavioral adaptation was also based in part on the coping strategies they employed and the support they sought and received, making the resilience process an important part of the stressful event experience.

The current study further develops conceptualizations of resilience as a transactional process, especially in terms of partner and family communication, and highlights the need to consider communication as a more central component of stress and ambiguous loss theories. The way people communicate with others helps them relate their subjective experience, make meaning, cope, and elicit support. Communication is more than a coping resource, or something people *have*; it is the instrument through which stress can be shared and managed socially and over time. Without communication resilience would be a solo journey, but it is not. These women were constantly re-negotiating their family relationships, adapting to new communication and behavioral needs, and eliciting, evaluating, and providing support in order to cope with the challenges and changes deployment caused. Family stress and resilience theories, as well as ambiguous loss theory, need to account for the centrality of these interactions in understanding coping and the way stress and loss are experienced and managed within a social context.

In a social context, however, people are likely to receive helpful and unhelpful responses from others. This study provides a personal and contextual view of support, as

women evaluate the responses they receive from others based on their own experiences, challenges, and needs. Women's needs to feel understood and validated, for example, made recognition, appreciation, understanding, relating, and reciprocating particularly helpful. These same needs made inappropriate comments, assumptions, misconceptions, comparisons, and pity extremely unhelpful. Their high levels of responsibility and lack of time made instrumental support and support by proxy very helpful. Their loneliness and feelings of loss made interaction, emotional support, and invitations and activities helpful. Information about what women found helpful and unhelpful can improve providers' knowledge of supportive communication and behavior in the context of deployment. However, the way the women evaluated responses from others was based upon their own needs and experiences, so responses intended to be supportive should always consider the context and multiple needs of the target. Supportive messages and behaviors that complement people's coping strategies reinforce the resilience process, as positive feelings and behaviors are reinforced and negative feelings and behaviors (or demands) are confronted and/or avoided. Of course, different feelings and experiences are co-occurring and dynamic, so providing positive responses involves assessment multiple target needs and desires and adaptation to changes over time.

The work that goes into sustaining the self and relationships during deployment is challenging and admirable, as women are responsible for themselves and their homes while also often acting as the gatekeepers to multiple family relationships. The many coping strategies discussed in the results, including different forms of coping communication between spouses and with children, are instrumental in helping women

overcome these tasks, continue to function, and reach the end of the deployment.

Resilience is not a particularly grand, celebratory process. Like a child falling off her bike, dusting herself off, and saddling up for another ride, a wife does the same each morning as she faces another day of deployment. It takes practice, it takes a positive attitude, it takes dealing with the unknown, it takes effort, and it takes help; but she finds the skills needed to make it through that day, and the next, and the next. And with each garbage day, each 'X' marked on the calendar, or each candy taken from the jar, she knows her husband is one day closer to returning home. There is growth, there are bad days, and there are days she's just getting by, but she makes it with the strength she finds within herself and with others.

Table 1

*Relational Coping Communication Patterns Based on Needs for Involvement or Protection and Tendencies toward Openness and Withholding During Deployment*

Involvement Need	High	<p><b>High Involvement/Low Protection</b>  <i>Sharers:</i>            High need for involvement. Openly communicate because need for involvement outweighs protection needs. Feel the importance of openness.</p>	<p><b>High Involvement/High Protection</b>  <i>Reluctants:</i>            High need for involvement, but also to protect. Tend to openly communicate, but with reservation and later questioning of the decision. Struggle between openness and withholding.</p>
	Low	<p><b>Low Involvement/Low Protection</b>  <i>Separates:</i>            Could openly communicate, but tend to withhold. Do not feel the importance of openly communicating, but not because they are protecting. Often have less opportunity to talk.</p>	<p><b>Low Involvement/High Protection</b>  <i>Protectors:</i>            Have a high need to protect, so they tend to withhold information and feelings. Feel withholding serves important functions for their soldiers and themselves.</p>
		High	Low
		Protection Need	

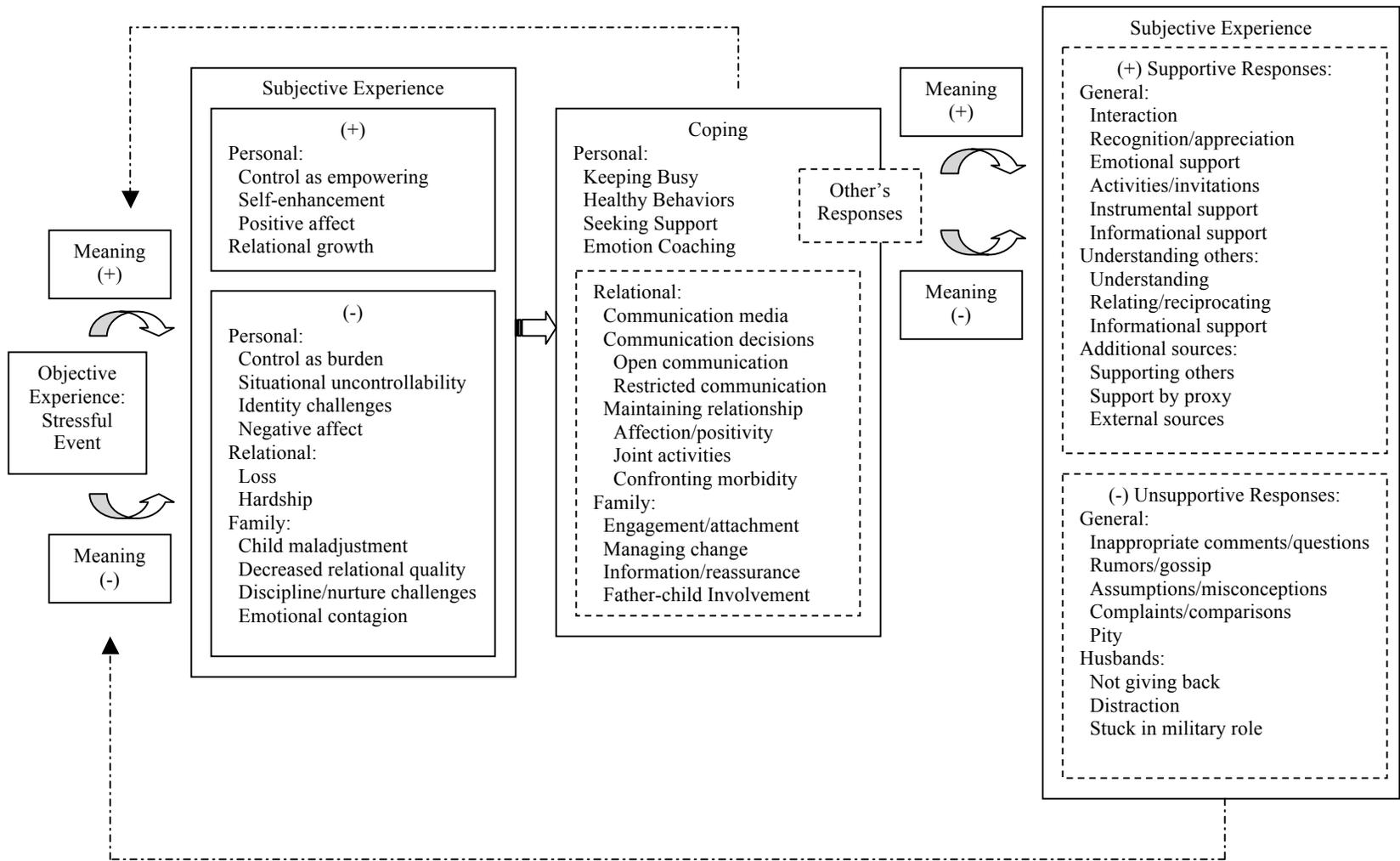


Figure 1. Dynamic and transactional family resilience model.



*Figure 2.* Photograph provided by participant.

## APPENDIX A

### Deployment Interview Protocol

- Start very open: Please tell me about your experience with deployment?
- What is the hardest thing about having your spouse deployed?
- What are the benefits of having your spouse deployed?
- How has the deployment of your spouse affected you? What changes have you experienced?
  - Personally?
  - Family/Relationship?
  - Parenting?
  - Daily life?
- Can you provide examples of how you think your relationships (family/spousal) are different from what you might consider the “norm” of a relationship?
- How do you manage these feelings/changes (what strategies do you use)?
- How do you tend to deal with deployment when your spouse is away?
  - What is the most/least helpful?
- How do you tend to deal with the deployment when your spouse returns/visits?
  - What is the most/least helpful?
- How does the way you deal with deployment impact your family? How do you incorporate your family members into your process and/or how do they incorporate you into their process?
- What sorts of resources are available to you as a military spouse?
  - Which resources do you utilize? Why?
  - What is the most/least helpful?
- Where do you tend to get support?
  - Examples?
  - What is the most/least helpful?
- How do you talk with people within your family about your experiences with deployment?
  - Examples?
  - Is this communication helpful? Why or why not?
- How do you talk with people outside your family about your experiences with deployment?
  - Examples?
  - Is this communication helpful? Why or why not?
- How do people talk with you about deployment?
  - Examples?
  - Is this communication helpful? Why or why not?
- What are the most helpful things that people do and say for you during deployment?
- What would you like people (including you) to do more or less of?
- If you were to give advice for civilians about how to be helpful, what would you say?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

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## VITA

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